

ryo shirakome
takayaki

#6

ARIFURETA:

ARIFURETA SHOKUGYOU DE SEKAISAIKYOU

FROM COMMONPLACE
TO WORLD'S STRONGEST

Zero





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ARIFURETA ZERO: FROM COMMONPLACE TO WORLD'S STRONGEST

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WORLD MAP of TORTUS



City of Outlaws, Andika

Reisen Gorge

Rocky Region

Crimson Desert

Shared Federation

Elbard Theocracy

Veika Kingdom

The Greenway

Contested Region

Dastia Kingdom

Azure Marsh

Astran Kingdom

Northern Peaks

Ur Lake

Uldia Dukedom

Odion Federation

Pale Forest

Grand Tree

Halfina Republic

Grandart Empire

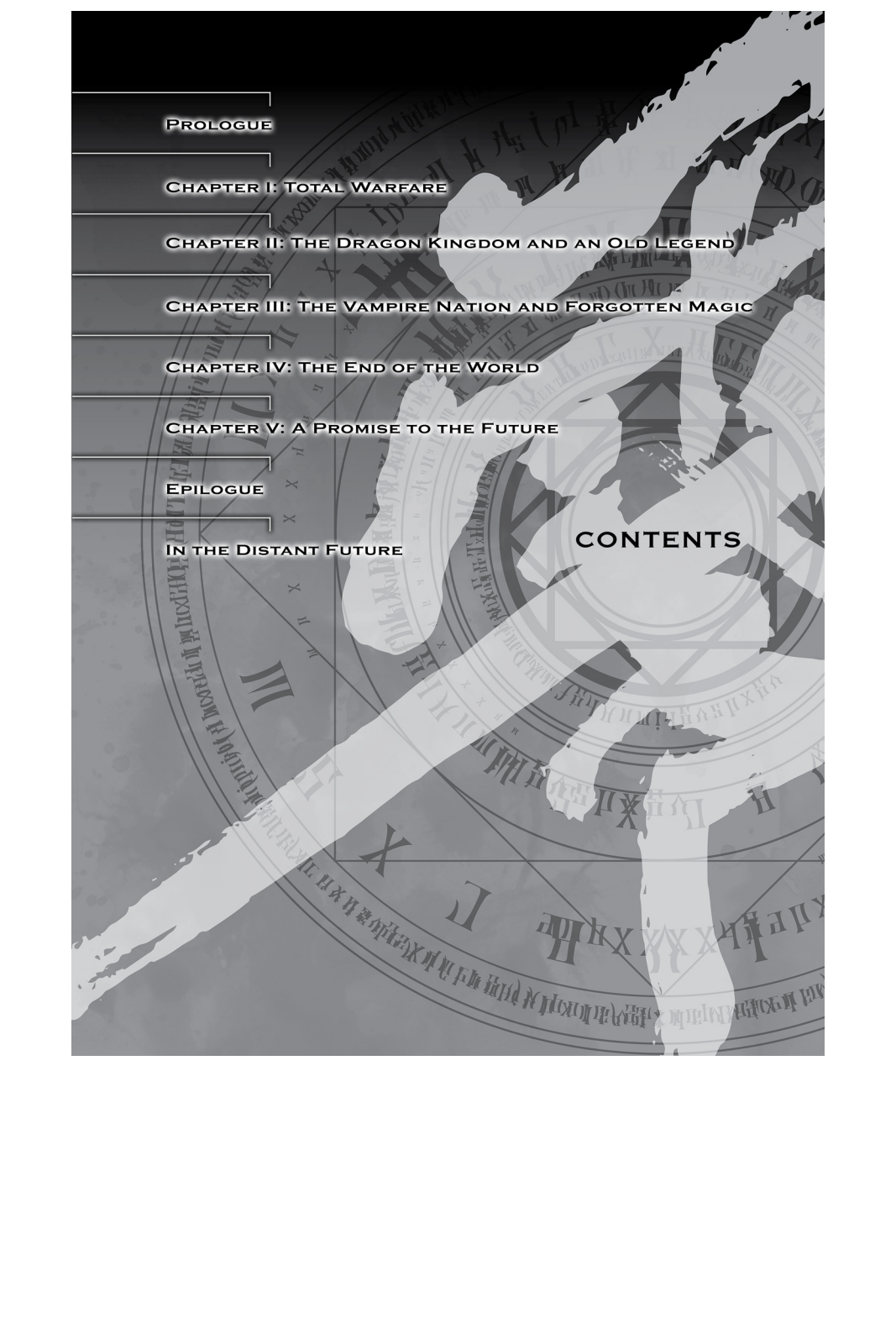
Igdol Empire

The Capital, Iguld

Obsidian Tundra

Hidden Schnee Village





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CHAPTER II: THE DRAGON KINGDOM AND AN OLD LEGEND

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Prologue

“Nee-samaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

“Dieneeeeeee!”

Meiru and Diene rushed at each other and hugged, tears leaking from both of their eyes, as they stood in one of Lac Elain’s larger holds. Both of them acted like they hadn’t seen each other in decades, even though it had hardly been more than six months.

“Welcome back, O-kun. How’d it go?” Miledi asked, bounding over to Oscar.

“Pretty smoothly. Though it took a lot longer than I’d hoped,” Oscar replied. He had gone to collect the last of the Liberators that were supposed to gather at headquarters—the Melusine pirate crew. Naturally, Meiru had been the one who’d wanted to go, but she’d had other duties to attend to, and Oscar had a separate reason for wanting to go, so he’d been chosen instead.

“What’s with you two? Is it just me...or are you acting really different around each other?” Kyaty asked, entering the submarine after Diene.

“Come on, Kyaty, don’t pry. Besides, it’s obvious what happened even if you don’t ask,” Chris chimed in, walking over to the group all the while. He was grinning, while Kyaty blushed and looked away bashfully.

Finally realizing just how close she was standing to Oscar, Miledi awkwardly cleared her throat and took a step back. Just then, Reinheit and Rasul appeared as well.

“Miledi, can I talk to you for a second?” Reinheit asked hopefully.

“Will you ever learn to take a hint, Hero? My princess clearly wishes to speak with me— Oh, I see her knight has returned.”

Tired of dealing with their constant advances, Miledi pushed Oscar in front of her like a shield. Reinheit glared openly at Oscar, while Rasul gave him an enigmatic smile.

“How many times do I have to warn you?! I won’t let my precious Miledi marry any of you layabouts!”

“Rasul-sama, please reconsider! The Reisen heir is not a suitable bride for someone of your stature!”

Salus, the acting commander of the Liberators, and Lestina, one of Rasul’s most trusted generals, showed up as well, neither of them trying to hide their indignation.

“Wait, what? You’re dating the hero and the Demon Lord too? Miledi, how many people are you cheating on Oscar with?! How did you get so good at seducing people?!” Kyaty asked in awe, taking a few steps back as she did.

“This is all a misunderstanding!” Miledi wailed.

However, Kyaty ran back to her comrades, shooing them away from Miledi and shouting, “Get away before she sinks her claws into you too!”

Ignoring the duo, Chris looked around the inside of the submarine and let out an appreciative sigh before saying, “This is one hell of a crew you put together.”

Every single race was represented. Demon General Elga, Beastman General Sim, and Laus were sharing drinks in one corner, while other tables had people from all walks of life mingling as they ate.

Planning for Operation Revolution Tolls had reached its climax. Everyone who’d be participating, whether they were human, demon, or beastman, had finished assembling at headquarters.

“Yeah, but there’s still *some* discord between the races,” Oscar replied with a wry smile.

Indeed, people of the same race more often were segregating themselves at their own tables than mingling with others. It was hardly surprising, since they had different ideals and values and cultures, but it still stung a little to see.

“It’s hard enough getting people of the same race to get along. You should be proud of what you’ve accomplished,” Lyutillis said, gracefully walking over to Oscar and Chris. She looked worriedly over at one corner, where the wolfman general Valf was speaking to Shushu, the female half-wolfman member of the former Reisen branch of the Liberators. Apparently, it had been Valf’s squad that had turned Shushu away after she’d escaped from her church captors.

Marshal and a few others were with Shushu, and for once it looked like she was willing to at least talk to Valf. Lyutillis’s words from a few days ago had probably helped soften her attitude. However, a few conversations wouldn’t be enough to overcome decades of resentment.

“The mere fact that all of these people are in the same room without trying to kill each other is a miracle,” Rasul said.

“The Demon Lord is correct. I would have never seen anything like this if I’d remained with the Templar Knights,” Reinheit added, and the two of them smiled at each other.

While it was true that there was still a bit of distance between the members of the different races, there was no hostility present. Everyone was doing their utmost to at least try to understand each other. From that angle, this wasn’t so bad a result. And realizing that,

Oscar and the others smiled.

“Now then, since we’ve finally all gathered, could we get a few words from our esteemed leader?” Salus asked, clapping his hands to get everyone’s attention.

They all suddenly turned to stare at Oscar. Miledi was currently being relentlessly teased by the pirates and hounded by Lestina about what her relationship was with Rasul, and it seemed they wanted him to go rescue her. Indeed, even Miledi was looking to Oscar for salvation.

Smiling awkwardly, Oscar walked over to go save her.

A few minutes later, Miledi was standing on a makeshift podium that consisted of a single wooden crate. The earlier clamor had died down, and the ship’s hold was perfectly silent.

The combined number of soldiers that Rasul and Lyutillis had brought with them totaled five thousand. They couldn’t all fit within the hold, but the ones who weren’t present were watching remotely through the Skynets that Oscar had made.

A little overwhelmed by the number of eyes on her, Miledi cleared her throat and took a deep breath.

“Thank you all for gathering here today,” she said, her voice echoing through the room and her sky-blue eyes taking everyone in.

“Before I begin, there’s something I need to ask. Is there anyone here who has objections to the plan?”

She looked over toward members of the demon army, who’d come on board just recently. Rasul looked over them as well, then nodded before turning back to Miledi and giving her a shrug.

“Sal. Have our messages reached the leaders of each country?”

Salus gave her a thumbs-up.

“O-kun, are our artifacts ready?”

Oscar adjusted his glasses and nodded confidently.

Miledi already knew all the preparations had been completed, but she wanted final confirmation to help boost everyone’s morale.

After that, she fell silent for a few seconds to let everyone steel themselves, then said, “Three days from now, we’re going to embark on the battle to secure our future. Our enemy is strong, and they will be prepared for us. As much as I’d like to say that all of us will return here safe and sound, many of us will die.”

Miledi’s voice trembled a bit as she said that. She somehow managed to sound both calm and heated at the same time. She then looked over each and every one of the Liberators gathered, burning their faces into her memory.

“I realize that asking you to die for the cause is dangerously close to the same blind zeal that drives the church. But even so, I must ask that of you,” she continued. Miledi almost seemed to be projecting an

invisible force as she talked, and everyone gulped.

“All of us here have to fight. To put an end to Ehit’s twisted games. To make this world a better place!”

Her voice grew stronger as she spoke.

“We aren’t anyone’s pawns! We live and fight for the things we believe in, not for some god’s enjoyment, but for our own sakes!”

Murmurs of assent could be heard from the crowd.

“We have the right to decide what we wish to believe in, who we hold dear, who we hate, and who we fight! We have the right to exercise free will!”

That was something that normally should have been taken for granted, but had been stolen from the people of this world by Ehit.

“We’re all people, with thoughts and desires and dreams of our own! No matter how hard Ehit tries to oppress us, he cannot break our spirits! The will to resist will never die!”

Miledi made a fist and raised it into the air.

“Let’s liberate this world from the curse laid upon it! That way, we can hold our heads high and be proud of who we are!”

She paused for a moment, letting the silence accentuate her next words.

“For a world where people can be free!”

The same wish that a young oracle had once held now echoed through the cheers of thousands upon thousands of people, from all races, classes, and creeds.

Chapter I: Total Warfare

To the people of the theocracy, the only thing notable about the public execution of the Liberators the church had caught was that it would further cement the victory the theocracy had achieved in the war with the republic. Death was the expected punishment for anyone who had aided the republic during the war. For the Templar Knights, however, this was a chance to reclaim their honor. They were hoping the rest of the Liberators would take the bait they'd set so they could thoroughly crush their greatest enemy once and for all.

But both the knights and the people were absolutely certain that today would mark a momentous day in the history of the church. The heretics who had plagued the theocracy for so long would be eliminated, and the glorious church would once more become the leading light of hope to humans all over the world.

Unfortunately for them, the Liberators proved to be a far larger threat than the church had ever anticipated. Quite literally too. The Liberators' massive black battleship, which was shaped like a giant whale, was so large that it covered the entire capital city in shadow. The aurora beam it had shot out also obliterated the capital's prized barrier, one of the very symbols of the theocracy's absolute might. The barrier had been presented to God's chosen people by Ehit himself, and in the theocracy's long history, it had never once been penetrated.

The townspeople stared up in shock as fragments of the shattered barrier rained to the ground and a lone figure leaped off the massive battleship's deck. As the figure drew closer, people were able to make out that it was a girl.

The light of the aurora had scarcely begun to fade when the girl wrapped herself up in a dazzling sky-blue sphere of mana. A moment later, a shock wave rocked through the city, followed by a voice that carried for miles.

"We are the Liberators! Those who fight against God's will!" the girl bellowed as she floated unaided above the crowd, using neither wind nor magical barriers to support her. "Our ultimate goal is to free this world from God's twisted games!"

Her gleaming white battle dress fluttered in the wind, the sphere of dazzling blue mana around her allowing her to utterly ignore one of the fundamental laws of nature.

"I am Miledi Reisen, the leader of the Liberators!"

Her transcendent, almost divine entrance made even the devout priests of the church momentarily think her beautiful. But her next words destroyed any reverence the members of the church might have inadvertently felt.

“And I am here to take the world back from you, Ehit!” she spat those words, as if disgusted by having to even say it, and pointed up at the peak of the Divine Mountain.

A clear declaration of war.

The common folk of the theocracy shivered in fear. Miledi’s very existence had overturned everything they thought they knew about the world. In their minds, heretics were weak, sniveling fools who could never hope to threaten the absolute authority of the church. After all, if anyone *could* threaten it, it wouldn’t be absolute anymore.

However, Miledi had just boldly stated that she would drag Ehit off his throne. For the first time in their lives, they began to doubt that the church truly was invincible.

“Blasphemy! Our Lord’s power is absolute!” a furious voice responded from one of the twelve pillars surrounding the execution platform. It belonged to none other than archbishop Kimaris Sintail. Despite the heat in his voice, the look in his eyes was as cold as ice. The only outward sign of his rage—aside from his voice, of course—was the slight frown on his mouth. He pounded his staff on the pillar he was standing on, and the thirty-three priests on the other eleven pillars followed suit. They, too, looked furious that anyone would dare question Ehit’s authority.

Another dazzling circle of light formed above the execution platform, looking just like an angel’s halo. It then began to revolve and grow in size until it dwarfed the priests casting it.

This was the strongest composite light spell, Divine Wrath, transformed into a circle rather than a beam. In this shape, it could strike in all directions at once, allowing it to execute everyone simultaneously. No one had ever managed to resist the destructive light of Divine Wrath. And now the priests had all been apostleified, were drawing a nigh-limitless supply of mana from the earth via the pillars they stood on, and were equipped with powerful replicas of the Seven Sacred Treasures.

“Death to all heretics!” one priest roared. A second later, the halo of light contracted. Then, there was a violent flash...and the city was smothered in light.

Kimaris had prioritized executing the prisoners over fighting Miledi, likely just to spite her. The joy in his eyes as he gazed up at Miledi made it clear he wanted to relish in her suffering. But a second later, his joy turned to confusion.

“You really do revel in death a little too much, Kimaris.”

There was a small *plink* from below that made Kimaris look down at the execution platform. The light of his Divine Wrath was slowly fading away into nothing. The priests and the leaders of the various nations gazed at the newcomer in utter shock, but Kimaris's face was twisted in pure hatred.

"So you came after all."

Kimaris had no idea how this man had made it there, but he wasn't about to deny the reality staring him in the face.

"Laus Baaaaaaaarn!"

Framed by the disappearing light of the Divine Wrath, Laus smiled. A second later, a pillar of jet black mana erupted from him and he hefted his similarly black warhammer. With one swing he blew away the remnants of Kimaris's spell. But as he saw what was on the now-visible execution platform, his jaw dropped open.

The priests, civilians, and foreign dignitaries were similarly stunned. Partly because all the heretics were unscathed, partly because the archbishop's strongest spell—further strengthened by the boons he'd received recently—had been completely countered, and partly because it had been Laus Barn of all people who'd stopped Kimaris, but none of those were the primary cause.

"Splendid. I do love to make a dramatic entrance. There's nothing quite like having everyone's eyes on you," Rasul said as he drank in everyone's stares.

"Oh my! I didn't know you had an exhibitionist streak, Demon Lord. The truth is, I also—"

Before Lyutillis could finish her thought, Rasul interrupted her by saying, "Your Majesty, please don't lump me in with you. I'm simply enjoying the shock on everyone's faces; nothing more. This is perhaps the greatest prank I've ever played in my life."

"Can't you two act a bit more dignified?" Laus asked in an exasperated voice.

"You want me to be dignified? Very well, allow me to introduce myself, then!" Rasul replied in a rather refined voice.

"He he, if you say so, Lau-chan-san," Lyutillis added.

A pillar of bloodred mana erupted from Rasul as he boldly declared, "My name is Rasul Alva Igdol! I am the Demon Lord!"

Lyutillis straightened her silvery-white hair and added, "And I am Lyutillis Haltina, the queen of the Haltina Republic!"

It wasn't just members of other races who'd come with the Liberators, but their respective leaders had as well. As that realization sank into the people watching, the two of them said in unison, "We are not enemies of mankind! In fact, we have come here today to assist the Liberators!"

Panic began to spread through the crowd of spectators. The scene

before them was so unbelievable that they refused to accept it as reality. Demons and beastmen joining forces was already an impossibility, so how could they be here to protect a group of humans? For that matter, how could they assist the Liberators?

“This is the future we fight for,” Laus said, his voice carrying over the mutterings of the crowd. “We’ll create a future where humans, demons, beastmen, and all the other mortal races can live together in peace!”

That was, of course, the very thing that the church claimed was a grave sin.

“Former Holy Templar Knights Commander Laus Barn is here today as a Liberator!”

Complete silence fell over the city square. For a moment, the entire city felt more like the middle of a snowy plain or an empty desert than one of the most populous places in the world.

The king of their most hated foe, the queen of the race they had persecuted, and the knight who used to represent the unwavering might of the church had all joined forces when they should have been mortal enemies. According to the church, that should have been impossible, so the fact that it wasn’t was another crack in their claims of absolute authority.

“How dare you bring such a despicable sight to the city of God!” Kimaris howled, his face twisted in sheer hatred. However, he couldn’t deny that the display was having its intended effect. The people’s faith in the church rapidly wavered. Whoever had come up with this sequence knew exactly what they were doing.

Seeing the hesitation spread through the crowd, Kimaris ruthlessly shouted, “Nothing has changed, you fools! Our Lord still wishes them dead. All units, attack!”

He unleashed another Divine Wrath at Laus and the others. The priests on the other towers worked in groups to do the same. Spears of light shot toward Laus and his comrades from all directions.

Lyutillis waved her Guardian Rod, prompting leaf-green mana to erupt from her.

“Breaching my defenses is as difficult as navigating the Pale Forest.”

Lyutillis specialized in support and protection over direct confrontation, and she was able to create a twelve-layered barrier instantly thanks to her evolution magic. The barrage of Divine Wraths slowly eroded her barriers, but she was able to continually cast more to maintain her defenses.

Rasul smiled fearlessly at the spells hurtling toward him and said, “Now then, let’s get this party started—Ignis!”

His bloodred blade appeared in front of him, and he used it to

slice through a dozen Divine Wraths at once.

Meanwhile, Laus countered Kimaris's Divine Wrath with one of his own, while swinging his warhammer at the ones cast by the lesser priests, dispersing them with the shock waves from his weapon.

"Go, Miledi Reisen!" he shouted. "You can leave this battlefield to us! Bring down Ehit and his minions, for the sake of our futures!"

At Kimaris's command, the theocracy's airships had begun charging toward Lac Elain. Their cannons trained on Miledi, and they opened fire as the church's dragons took flight from the airships' decks toward the Liberators' flagship.

The common folk began to flee as explosions rang out above them, and Lac Elain glided into action once more. Miledi floated back up onto its deck as it blazed forward. A transparent barrier of light, looking almost like an eggshell, surrounded the submarine. The dragons' breath and the airship's cannons battered futility against the barrier. The cannon fire may as well have been a fireworks display for all the damage it did.

Obviously, the tens of thousands of knights who'd been stationed at the city's various gates weren't just going to stand back and watch as their capital was invaded. Lilith's army launched a barrage of attacks up at Lac Elain, and she herself spread her silver wings to assault it directly.

"What?!"

Before she could go more than a few feet, a massive elliptical portal appeared above her and her troops, showering them with a deluge of black boxes. Those black boxes were the Dark Gates that Oscar had developed. And a similar deluge was falling on the knights waiting at the city's other gates.

As the gates landed, the opened portals spewed out thousands of black-clad knights and magical beasts.

"Oh, shit! Everyone form—"

The knights began screaming before Lilith could even get out a single order. Even though they'd been apostleified, and granted relic replicas, they were still dropping like flies. The reason for that was because all the magical beasts were equipped with god-tier artifacts, and the black knights themselves were artifact golems.

The Templar Knights weren't able to maintain any semblance of formation against the onslaught. Confusion reigned, which was hardly surprising considering three thousand magical beasts and artifact golems had shown up in their midst.

The eastern and western gates weren't faring any better either. They, too, had been hit by surprise armies of beasts and golems. None of the forces stationed at the city's gates were in any position to attack Lac Elain. And so, it continued its flight unimpeded.

Jets of mana spewed from the engines at the rear, and it accelerated significantly. One of the church's airships moved into its predicted course to stop it, but Lac Elain plowed through it without even slowing.

Panic began to spread as the damaged airship careened toward the ground, its cannons firing wildly and barely even managing to graze Lac Elain. Worst of all, the airship was heading straight for the stands where the foreign dignitaries were seated.

The kings' and dukes' guards lined up in front of their charges, determined to try to protect them even when they knew it was futile. Fortunately, they needn't have worried. The Liberators' only enemy was the church, and they refused to let anyone not involved in their war die during the revolution.

"Divine Wrath—Overcharge."

A blinding bolt of light swallowed the airship whole, shattering it into a thousand tiny pieces before it hit the ground. The knights who'd been charging to the plaza from the northern street stopped in their tracks as they saw the utter devastation that had been wrought with one spell.

Kimaris kept up his barrage of attacks, but even he spared a glance toward the stands where shards of the broken airship rained down incessantly.

A lone young man was standing amidst the falling wreckage. He was dressed in resplendent white armor and was holding his sword aloft.

In an awed voice, Velka's king asked the young man, "Wh-Who are you?"

With his back turned to the king, the young man said in a confident voice, "Reinheit Ashe, the hero of this generation. I, too, fight with the Liberators!"

The foreign leaders and the theocracy's citizens had thought nothing would be able to surprise them anymore, but they had been sorely mistaken. To think even the hero had joined forces with the Liberators. It seemed as though everyone under the sun was denying the church, and by extension, God's supremacy. However, there was no time for the people to come to terms with this development, as events were progressing at a breakneck pace.

The Templar Knights who'd been stationed near the spectator stands rushed toward Reinheit, but two newcomers sent them flying before they even got close.

"It's an honor to meet you, lords and ladies. I am one of the Haltina Republic's generals, Sim Gato."

"And I am one of the demon empire's generals, Elga Insut. Fear not, for I am not your foe. We are here with the hero to protect you."

“No way...” one of the members of the Grandort Empire’s party muttered. They were closest to the demon empire and had suffered far more at the demons’ hands than any other nation. Seeing Laus join hands with the leaders of two other races had been a huge shock, but it was no less shocking to see beastmen and demon generals working with the hero of all people.

“Is the world really about to change?” someone muttered. And he most likely was not alone in thinking that.

An army of knights descended upon the plaza, determined to snuff out this rebellion, and any hope of change, with it. But of course, Reinheit and his two friends weren’t the only people who’d descended to fight on the ground.

“Sorry, but this is as far as you go.”

“Ufu fu fu, how about we share a passionate hug?”

“You know, you’re probably the only person I know who can kill with hugs.”

Leonard, Jinglebell, and Kipson popped up next to Laus and sent the incoming knights flying.

Of course, Lyutillis had aid as well.

“At long last, I actually get to fulfill my duty.”

“Geh, I wanna go home. Can’t I just go stealth mode and leave this to you guys?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Earn your keep, you worthless rabbit.”

Craid, Sui, Valf, and Nirke appeared seemingly out of nowhere to protect their queen.

Lestina and a group of demons also showed up to guard Rasul.

“Mass-produced teleportation artifacts?” Kimaris muttered in annoyance. Looking around, he saw dozens of portals opening up all around the plaza, surrounding him and his priests.

Laus had thrown out as many Dark Gates as he could while fending off Kimaris’s Divine Wraths. And Liberators, beastmen warriors, and demon soldiers now poured out of the gates to protect the prisoners from the church.

“Tch! What are you fools doing! Don’t let them escape!”

To make matters worse for the church, portals had appeared on the execution platform itself, so the captured Liberators were being whisked away to safety. All Kimaris could do was grit his teeth and watch as his prey escaped from right under his nose. Despite the new strength he’d received, he couldn’t get even a single attack past Laus, Lyutillis, and Rasul.

A few seconds later, a large shadow blanketed the plaza.

“I hope you’re watching, everyone. This is the moment Miledi and her merry band of friends change the world!”

Lac Elain had passed over the square and was heading straight for the royal palace. Cheers rose up from the Liberators down below.

Miledi's tone was bright, and she didn't sound anything like the dignified leader she had upon her arrival. There was something inherently annoying about the way she talked, so it was hard to believe the two voices could really have come from the same person. The contrast only served to add to the confusion on the ground too.

"Damn you..." Kimaris growled. However, he knew there was nothing he could do. Still, he didn't let himself dwell on that and refocused his attention on the enemies before him. Maybe he couldn't stop Lac Elain's advance, but if he could kill the church's greatest traitor, the Demon Lord, and the republic's queen, the battle might yet turn in their favor.

"Leave that battleship to the Three Pillars of Radiance! Focus on crushing the heretics here on the ground!"

At Kimaris's command, the plaza devolved into a chaotic melee.

Up above, on Lac Elain's deck, Miledi looked down at the receding plaza. Despite how cheerful she'd sounded just a second ago, her face was lined with worry. She didn't even notice the ceaseless barrage of magic and explosions battering futility against Lac Elain's barrier.

Oscar put a reassuring hand on her shoulder and said, "Don't worry. Believe in your comrades."

Miledi looked over her shoulder and saw the gentle look in Oscar's eyes that rested behind his glasses.

"Hmph, I never doubted them for a second," she responded with a grin, prompting Oscar to smile back.

"All right, all right, no flirting while we're being bombarded on all sides!" Meiru said, walking over.

"Just how shameless do you have to be to make googly eyes at each other while we're in the middle of a life-or-death battle?" Vandred added.

Oscar and Miledi gasped and took a few steps away from each other upon hearing that.

Sighing, Naiz said, "It's a race against time now. We need to destroy that pillar in the cathedral before Ehit has a chance to pull something. Don't forget that."

"I-I know, I know! That reminds me, Nacchan, you sure you can't just teleport in?!"

"I've been trying for some time now, but...it doesn't look like I can. Sorry."

The crux of the plan was to make it to the cathedral and destroy the Heavenly Pillar to hamper Ehit's means of influencing Tortus. That was why the others were holding the church's forces at bay while

Miledi prioritized reaching the cathedral.

Had they been able to teleport straight there, it would have been easy, but something seemed to be blocking Naiz.

“Don’t worry about it. We knew they might be able to stop our teleports, remember?”

Miledi and the others knew Ehit treated everything as a game and cared only about relieving his boredom. Thus, they’d anticipated that he’d do something that would keep them from skipping the script he’d written for them.

Laughing, Meiru looked over at the palace’s central terrace, where Pope Lucifer appeared to be praying. An aura of pure white mana surrounded him.

“Then I suppose we just have to switch to plan B and take the church out in a frontal assault.”

“Yep. Don’t forget, once we make it to the cathedral, we have to destroy all routes leading to it.”

There were three ways to reach the cathedral from the palace. You could physically climb the mountain, take the lift, or use the teleportation circle in one of the palace’s rooms. Since most of the church’s forces were in the city to make sure the execution went smoothly, if Miledi and the others could make it to the cathedral and destroy the routes leading to it, they’d be able to take down the pillar undisturbed.

That was plan B, which they created in case directly teleporting to the cathedral proved impossible.

“Here it comes! All hands, brace for impact!” Salus—who was serving as Lac Elain’s captain—shouted through the speakers.

The palace in front of them began to glow. Or, to be more specific, the ostentatiously decorated skywalk at the edge of the palace began to glow. Its strange geometric shape was neither artistic nor practical. And that was because the skywalk was actually a magic circle that activated the large-scale anti-air spell, Holy Ray. It was an offensive spell on par with the defensive barrier that had protected the capital.

The Sacred Mountain was bathed in pale blue light, which flowed down into the palace. As the glow increased in intensity, the shape of the magic circle grew more clear.

There was no time for Lac Elain to dodge, but Miledi and the others hadn’t been planning on dodging to begin with. As the airships and church’s dragons quickly retreated to safety, Lac Elain continued plowing forward.

“Ha ha ha ha! Bring it oooooon!” Salus shouted, clearly getting pumped up.

Sparks began to run across the skywalk as the spell charged. The sparks slowly converged at one point on the circle, directly in front of

Lac Elain. There was so much energy crackling in that spot that the very air was being vaporized. Then the spell fired, and for an instant, all was silent.

Holy Ray was so massive that it made Lac Elain's main cannons look like pea shooters. It was as if the wrath of the Sacred Mountain itself were bearing down on the ship.

"Hah, don't underestimate our defenses," Oscar stated confidently.

"Purge the Black Barrier! Deploy all shields to our front!" Salus shouted at the same time.

The black armor that covered Lac Elain detached from the ship and reformed itself into an exceptionally thick wall in front of them. The massive aura of light from the palace hit the shield and...passed right through it. Or so it seemed, anyway. In truth, the massive shield worked under the same principles as Oscar's own Onyx Shields. The shield's surface was merely one giant portal that teleported away any attack that hit it.

Just then, though, three beams of silver light rained down on Lac Elain from above. They were the disintegration beams fired from the apostles who had given Miledi and the others so much trouble before. The main shield could only just barely handle Holy Ray, so it didn't have the power to also deflect those beams. The ship's barrier and other defenses wouldn't be able to handle such a strong attack.

"I knew you'd try that!" Miledi said with a smirk. She then created three palm-sized black spheres and threw them up at the incoming beams.

The balls she'd made so casually curved the beams' trajectories, causing them to hit the plaza in front of the palace instead. More disintegration blasts rained down on the ship a moment later, but Miledi deftly took care of them all. She used gravity balls to redirect them to empty spots on the floor, rendering them harmless.

Eventually, the Holy Ray began to fizzle out. Lac Elain then plowed forward, ignoring the oncoming apostles, and the shield disassembled itself. The respective sections of black armor flew back to their positions on the ship and reattached themselves.

With their vision no longer obscured, Miledi and the others could see Lucifer's surprise, as well as the utter disbelief on the faces of the Three Pillars of Radiance's commanders. They had finally realized what Miledi was planning to do.

One of the Paladins leaped off the balcony toward Lac Elain. And at the same time, a veritable wall of magical missiles came hurtling toward the Liberators from the skywalk. Lac Elain trained all of its weapons on the assault and fired back with its own magical barrage.

The sight resembled two meteor showers colliding. The process repeated itself over and over as Lac Elain approached, and eventually,

not all the spells collided with each other. Some scratched Lac Elain's armor, while others blasted off parts of the skywalk. But despite the onslaught, Lac Elain didn't slow down at all.

"Now *there's* a standing ovation worthy of my magical genius!" Miledi shouted, laughing.

"Yahoooooooo! Focus the barrier on the ship's prow! Chaaaaaarge!" Salus shouted, and Lac Elain rammed right into the royal palace.

There was a deafening roar as the impact shook even the mountain behind it. Shock waves rippled out, spreading through the entire city.

Dragon riders and airships alike struggled to stay in the air as the shock waves buffeted them and the entire palace above the central terrace, including the throne room, came crashing down.

It was an incredible sight. It looked similar to what would happen if you drove a car into a house at full speed, except in this case the house was a palace and the car was a giant submarine that was bigger than a whale. Barely a third of it had embedded itself in the palace, even.

From a distance, it looked like a giant creature was taking a bite out of the mountain. It truly was a fantastical sight.

"They're insane," Strass, the commander of the Templar Knights' second division muttered as he pushed some rubble off of him.

"That certainly isn't something a sane person would ever do..." Morcus Creant, the commander of the Templar Knights' fourth division replied, trembling a little.

The central terrace led directly to the palace's largest room, which was the chapel. There, a thousand Holy Templar Knights had been waiting under Kaime and Selm's command, but now they were all on the ground, groaning in pain.

Thanks to their apostleification, only a few of them had died, but most were no longer in any shape to move. Those who could were still stunned by the sheer insanity of what had just happened.

It took a lot to faze one of the church's knights, but ramming a massive flying submarine into the royal palace was something no one would've ever expected.

"Tch, looks like the pope managed to run away. I was hoping he'd died back there," Miledi said casually as she leaped off of Lac Elain's deck. She then looked over at the chapel, where Lucifer was waiting behind a solid guard of Paladins.

A second later he disappeared, along with his guards. It seemed one of his Paladins possessed special magic that allowed them to teleport. They were most likely headed for the cathedral. Miledi had hoped to destroy the lift and the teleportation circle before anyone else got there, but it didn't look like that would be possible. Nor could

they chase after Lucifer, since now he'd be the one destroying those means of transportation.

More likely than not, going after him would just be a waste of time. Upon realizing that, Miledi made a snap decision.

"Nacchan."

"Don't worry, I know what you're thinking. Go."

Miledi would leave the palace to Naiz. At the very least, he'd be able to stop anyone else from destroying the lift and magic circle. Besides, he'd be able to fulfill one other very important goal while he was here.

As Naiz vanished, Miledi turned on her heel. She didn't spare the remaining knights a single glance. Her disdain for them caused them to seethe with rage.

"Your antics have gone too far, Reisen," the new commander of the Templar Knights' third division, Vapla, said. He had ten swords strapped to his back in a circle, and he was known within the theocracy as the Sword Saint. He drew the two swords closest to his waist and closed the distance between him and Miledi in an instant.

"Seriously, *you're* the Sword Saint?" Badd said with a shake of his head, blocking Vapla's strike with his scythe.

"You..."

He'd moved so fast that no one had even seen him jump off the deck. Moving protectively in front of Miledi, he said, "Our leader's busy. You'll have to contend with fighting her second-in-command."

"You're the Knight Hunter."

Badd's mana-eating scythe, Egxess, suddenly wreathed itself in a black aura, and a second later, it launched a crescent-shaped shock wave at Vapla.

Vapla spun his swords like a windmill to deflect the attack and leaped back to gain some distance. The knights who'd run over to assist him backed away as well. At the same time, a fully armored Marshal was fighting another one of the knight commanders.

"Sorry, but you're not getting past me!"

"Move, damn you!" Morcus shouted, trying to knock Marshal away with his halberd. However, Marshal simply activated his Diamond Skin and blocked all of the incoming blows.

"Die, you filthy half-breed!"

"Shut the fuck up, you bastard!"

A short distance away, Strass was fighting Shushu. He kept slashing at her with his double daggers, but she used her Repulse to keep him at bay.

"God, look at all these white-haired old farts. Disgusting."

"Hey! My hair's white too, you know, Chris?!"

Meanwhile, Chris and Kyaty were taking care of the grunt knights

with their respective special magics, Vorpal Slash and Acceleration.

More and more of Miledi's allies poured out of the ship. Three hundred Liberators—a full seventy percent of their total fighting force—and two hundred of the Melusine Pirate crew were now fighting in the chapel. They were outnumbered two to one by the knights, but they weren't letting a single one get past them.

Now that it had unloaded its occupants, Lac Elain rumbled to life and started backing out of the rubble. The sky behind it was clear, much to the chagrin of the knights.

“Onee-sama! Leave the palace to us! Good luck with your fight!” Diene shouted as the submarine retreated.

“Diene... Thanks, I'll come back soon! Chris, if anything happens to Diene, I'll tear you limb from limb, you hear?!”

“What?!”

And with that, Miledi and the others were back in the air. But the moment they were clear of the palace, another disintegration beam bore down on them. It was much thicker and far more powerful than the ones they had faced earlier, so Miledi suspected the three apostles had combined their strength to fire it.

Kaime and the others looked relieved that the apostles had joined the fight. They were certain no one would be able to withstand the combined might of the three of them. So long as they barred the path forward, no one would be able to get past them. That, too, was one of the “absolute” truths of the church. However, Oscar just calmly walked in front of Miledi and deployed one of his Onyx Shields to take the blow.

Any normal artifact would have disintegrated in seconds, but even though the portal couldn't disperse the entirety of the beam, the shield's unbelievable sturdiness allowed it to withstand the attack.

“I won't allow you to get in Miledi's way.”

“Oh my, Oscar-kun! I can't believe you're flirting even in this situation!” Meiru said in a teasing voice.

“Aww, you're such a lady-killer, O-kun! At this rate, I'll fall for you all over again!” Miledi added cheerily.

“Is this really the time for jokes?” Vandre asked in an exasperated tone.

Meanwhile, the Holy Templar Knights, as well as the Paragons of Light led by Mulm, watched on in disbelief. Mulm had thought to bring his dragons back to slow Lac Elain's advance, but now he was witnessing the might of three apostles being countered. Indeed, even the apostles were surprised by the turn of events. But to Miledi and the others, being able to hold their own against a few apostles was nothing special.

As the apostles momentarily recoiled in shock, Miledi's expression

went blank.

“Out of the way,” she said in a cold voice before raising one hand into the air.

A second later, she unleashed the spell she’d been working on while Oscar was defending her. The three apostles flinched as her blue eyes locked onto them. They abandoned their assault and tried to get out of the way, but their surprise dulled their reactions, so they were a hair too late.

“Heavencrush,” Miledi said in a quiet whisper.

A massive black ball of pure gravity appeared between the apostles, black sparks jumping across its surface. This was a far cry from the Heavensfall Miledi had used in the past. For one, it was big enough to swallow all three apostles at once. For another, its pull was so strong that they couldn’t hope to escape.

Even under Miledi’s expert control, the sphere was so powerful that its residual gravity broke off more of the palace, sucked up the rubble, and even gouged a hole into the Sacred Mountain. Had she not deployed multiple other gravitational fields to keep the sphere’s effect localized, it would have swallowed up the entire palace, all of Lac Elain, and everybody in it, including herself. The Paragons were lucky they’d kept their distance. Due to that, most of them were able to drop low to the ground and avoid being sucked in by the gravity sphere. The few that didn’t make it in time could only struggle helplessly as the sphere sucked them in and crushed the life out of them.

Several airships were caught in the gravitational field as well, and they were ripped apart before the sphere absorbed them. Naturally, the apostles were slaughtered as well, as they’d been the closest to the sphere when it had spawned.

“Today is the last day you get to look down on humans,” Miledi said, directing her words to the malicious puppet master pulling the apostles’ strings as she curled her fingers into a fist.

The sphere contracted in on itself, utterly obliterating everything that had been sucked into it, including the apostles.

“I don’t...believe it...” a knight muttered, his words carrying far in the ensuing silence.

The strongest of Ehit’s servants had been slaughtered with ease. Indeed, to the knights, this really was unbelievable. It made more sense to question their sanity than it did to accept the scene that had unfolded before their eyes.

Miledi Reisen’s power was so great that for the first time, the knights felt *fear* through their religious zeal and fervent fury. That, of course, worked out in Miledi’s favor, since it meant she had fewer obstacles to plow through.

“All right, Sal, Badd! I’m leaving everything down here to you

two!"

"You can count on us. Go on ahead, Miledi."

"Yeah, go wild up there!"

As always, Miledi switched gears so fast that the knights began to wonder whether she had a split personality. She went from looking like a regal ruler to a grinning clown in an instant.

Finally freed from his paralyzing fear, Mulm raised his bow and aimed at Miledi.

"I won't let you get any closer! Adra, get her!"

Adra faithfully opened his jaws and unleashed his breath at the same time that Mulm fired his arrow. It split into a hundred identical arrows as it streaked through the air toward Miledi.

"Go on ahead, I'll take care of things here," Vandre said, firing twice as many arrows back at Mulm and countering Adra's breath with his own. He was holding a black bow, with dozens more floating in the air next to him. His faithful wyvern, Uruluk, was also there, clad in artifact armor.

"Thanks. Don't take too long though, Van-chan."

"We'll be done in a flash. Taking care of these guys and destroying their means of transportation won't take any time at all."

Oscar held his fist out to Vandre, and Vandre tapped it with his own. Meiru patted Vandre on the shoulder as well, then a second later, Miledi reversed gravity. She, Meiru, and Oscar fell up toward the mountain's peak at breakneck speed as a result.

"How many times do I have to say it, I'm not letting you leave!" Mulm shouted.

"You can say it as many times as you want, but that doesn't mean you can actually back those words up," Vandre said disdainfully, once again blocking Mulm's assault. His skill with weapons was so great that he could shoot Mulm's arrows out of the air with his own.

"Fine, then I'll overwhelm you with numbers! Get him, men!"

Seven hundred Paragons of Light rushed up toward Vandre.

"Quality over quantity, huh?" Vandre mumbled as he stored his bow in his Treasure Trove, pulled out a tiny jewel tied to a braided cord, and threw it into the air. A second later, the white jewel emitted a dazzling light. Thinking it was just a simple attempt at blinding them, Mulm and the others shielded their eyes. But the light didn't last long, and as it faded, the knights realized what the jewel truly was.

"Tch, so you teleported your disgusting beasts here?!"

Indeed, the jewel had been a portal that had allowed Vandre to call upon hundreds more of his armored wyvern familiars. They were grouped into squads of ten, with a Schnee warrior leading each pack.

"At long last, we can fight together, Van-sama!" Margaretta said

as she rode the lead wyvern.

Vandre drew the greatsword at his back and hefted it onto his shoulder.

“Now then, I’m tired of seeing your ugly mug. Let’s see whether my wyverns or your dragons are stronger. I missed my chance to finish your measly beasts off in the last war, so this is as good a time as any to finish the job.”

“Hmph, we’ve grown far stronger since then!”

“And so have we.”

Vandre and Adra once again fired their breath at each other, signaling the start of the greatest aerial battle Tortus had ever seen.

Miledi and her friends zoomed up to the eight thousand meter peak of the Divine Mountain, blazing by the mountainside in an instant. With how powerful Miledi was now, it wouldn’t take even a minute to get everyone there.

Oscar had even made her artifacts that kept her supplied with oxygen and let her adjust the atmospheric pressure around her at will. Plus, there were no remaining obstacles in Miledi’s path, so the group was able to reach the cathedral without incident.

An impossibly steep staircase led up to the cathedral’s main entrance, which was flanked by beautiful pillars of white marble. A bird’s-eye view showed that there were fountains and a garden in the courtyard, despite the cathedral being well above the elevation plants could survive. Past the courtyard was the central temple, which was unbelievably grand. It was five stories tall and about two hundred meters in diameter. The temple’s four corners had hundred-meter tall towers and a large dome rose out of the center.

“Guess we arrived a little too late.”

“Yeah, our welcoming party got here before us.”

A squad of ninety Paladins was waiting atop the temple’s roof for Miledi and the others. At their center was Pope Lucifer, who was glaring directly up at Miledi.

“It doesn’t matter,” Miledi said calmly, unleashing a torrent of sky-blue mana. She ignored Lucifer and his Paladins entirely and instead focused her attention on the temple itself. Or more specifically, on the lone pillar in the center of the temple that allowed mortals to commune with God.

“Heavencrush!” Miledi roared, unleashing the spell she’d been charging the entire time they’d been flying to their present location. Unfortunately, she wasn’t able to end everything in a single blow.

“Tch, I should have known it wouldn’t be that easy.”

A rainbow-colored barrier appeared around the temple, blocking the same spell that had managed to obliterate three apostles at the

same time.

“Miledi!” Oscar shouted, grabbing her by the waist and pulling her backward a second before a flash of light pierced the spot she’d been standing in. It had been fired from the holy lance in Darrion’s hands.

“It’s futile,” the young Paladin commander said in a booming voice.

“I, Darrion Kaus, shall never allow you to breach these sacred walls.”

Lucifer stepped forward and added, “Do you realize where you stand?”

His voice was gravelly, but surprisingly calm.

“Divine Crusade,” he said simply, raising his staff. The entire temple was bathed in a dazzling silver light...and a second later, he said, “Sanctified Purge.”

The light expanded outward, covering the entire mountain in a silver aura.

“Oh no! O-kun!” Miledi shouted.

“I’ve already activated my purge-counteracting artifact. But it’s still this effective at weakening us even with that up.”

“I’ll probably bleed my mana dry if I keep trying to counteract it with restoration magic,” Meiru added.

The weakening effect of Lucifer’s spell was far greater than what Selm had achieved with his replica staff. Part of that was, of course, because the main cathedral itself was an artifact that strengthened those who believed in Ehit and weakened heretics. Even when it had just been partially activated, it had been enough to stymie Naiz’s teleports. And to make matters worse, Miledi could feel a new threat materializing behind her. Turning around, she saw four new apostles appearing from rifts in the air.

The look Lucifer and the apostles gave Miledi made it clear that unless she fought and defeated them, this battle would not end. One way or another, Ehit would force the Liberators to play his game.

“Bring it on,” Miledi said with a fearless smile. At her signal, Oscar flourished his umbrella and Meiru split her saber into a snake sword.

In response, the apostles brandished their dual claymores and spread their wings. Darrion raised his shield and spear and the paladins behind him followed suit with their own holy weapons.

Lucifer waved his withered, decrepit arm with surprising force, turning his pristine white robes into a suit of gleaming armor. Smiling faintly, he said to Miledi, “Our Lord has been looking forward to this game. Do try to entertain him before you perish.”

“He’s had more than enough fun already. It’s way past his

bedtime, so I'm here to put him to sleep," Miledi replied coolly, signaling the start of the fight.

Meanwhile, back at the palace down below, a massive scream ripped through the central temple. A second later, there was a spurt of blood and a severed head flew through the air.

"Gah! Commander, your orders?!"

"Huh?"

The Templar Knights had just seen three apostles get slaughtered in the blink of an eye. The shock had caused them all to freeze up for a moment, which had been a fatal mistake. Dozens of Templar Knights were slain before the group regained their senses and remembered they were still under attack.

One of the division captains, Lelei Argeson, looked to Kaime for commands, but Kaime was still too shocked to have finished processing what had happened. She fired an arrow strengthened with her special magic, Arrows of Atonement, that whizzed past Kaime's cheek and struck his assailant.

"Whoa! You've got one scary babysitter there, boy!" Badd said in surprise as he knocked the arrow away with a twirl of his scythe.

"B-Boy?! How dare you address me like that!"

Badd's taunts finally snapped Kaime out of his reverie and he brandished his Holy Sword, charging at Badd.

"Commander, don't fall for his taunts!" Lelei roared. However, her warning fell on deaf ears. Kaime's face reddened even further in embarrassment as Badd easily parried his full-powered swing.

Losing himself in rage, Kaime unfurled his wings and unleashed a barrage of white feathers at Badd. Though his feathers didn't possess any disintegration magic, each of them was still as powerful as a Celestial Flash, so they were quite threatening. And yet, Badd easily dodged the deadly downpour, his condescending grin only growing wider. Twirling Egxess like a pinwheel, he scattered the feathers while draining the mana in them. As he did so, he shouted to his comrades, "Looks like he can't use his disintegration powers without some prep time!"

"Wha—?!" Kaime exclaimed, reddening even further.

Sui had already told Badd and the others about how immature Kaime was. Thus, Badd had figured if he provoked Kaime, he'd be able to find out just how much power Kaime could bring to bear in an instant, so he'd done just that.

"How dare you make a fool out of me!"

"Calm yourself, Commander! The battle has devolved into a melee, we need your orders to fight effectively!"

Lelei strode up to stand by Kaime and used her mana—which was

now silver thanks to her apostleification—to create another arrow. As Badd stared at the mana-rich arrow, his expression turned grim.

Lelei loosed it, sending the arrow streaking toward Badd at the speed of light. Until now he'd acted like he'd been toying with his opponents, but Badd had to dodge it in earnest. He jumped to one side and deflected the arrow with his scythe. The arrow ended up slamming into a nearby pillar and blowing right through it with ease. Lelei's arrow was clearly enhanced with disintegration magic.

"They need two to three seconds to charge their disintegration magic! You can tell they're doing it when they concentrate their mana in one spot!" Badd shouted while dodging another barrage of Kaime's feathers. Meanwhile, he kept an eye on Lelei's arrow, which did a U-turn midair to chase him down once more.

Eggress let out a roar and a black aura surrounded it. The scythe almost looked frustrated that it had failed to absorb the arrow's mana in one go.

"Eat it all this time, Eggress!"

The dark aura coalesced around the blade of the scythe, and Badd swung it right at the disintegration arrow, scattering it to the four winds. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Lelei fire a normal arrow of light while trying to calm her commander down.

Heh! Must be tough, having a brat as your commander!

Selm was Kaime's vice-captain, and technically the second in command of the Holy Templar Knights, but since he wasn't much better than Kaime in terms of maturity, Lelei was the one who really took charge most of the time. Swallowing her irritation, she desperately tried to get her inexperienced commander to actually act like a true leader. Under normal circumstances, Badd and the others would have loved to have had a pair of naive children serving as their enemy's commander. After all, it meant the enemy's movements would be easier to predict and outmaneuver.

Indeed, the current situation was favorable to the Liberators, since Kaime wasn't giving any real commands, so the Holy Templar Knights couldn't coordinate themselves. Meanwhile, the Liberators and pirates were working together seamlessly to push the isolated knights back and even defeat some of them.

The regular Templar Knights and their captains weren't faring much better. Chris, Kyaty, and the other elites of the Melusine Pirate Crew were keeping Strass occupied. Howzer, Madame Jacqueline, Nadia, Solas, and Bakara were matched up with Morcus. And Marshal, Tony, Shushu, and Abe were taking care of Vapla.

It was honestly impressive that the division commanders were managing to fend off attacks from all directions despite how shaken they looked. However, they didn't have any leeway to give orders to

their men. Even a few words of encouragement probably would have been enough to shake off the despair the knights had felt upon seeing their apostles slain so easily.

Frustrated that they couldn't even manage that due to their young commander having let the blood rush to his head, Lelei shouted, "Commander!"

"Tch, I know, I know! Noble knights of the church, hear—"

"Come on, kid, it's way past your bedtime! Your dad's come to take you home!" Badd interjected, making Kaime's expression stiffen.

Even Selm, who was a good distance away, reacted to that. He'd been desperately struggling to fend off Snowbell, who was decked out in bikini armor and an overcoat, but his expression did a complete one-eighty upon hearing Badd's taunts.

Lelei clicked her tongue in annoyance. In an attempt to shut Badd up, she charged up another disintegration arrow to throw at him. However, that turned out to be a mistake. As Badd had predicted, it took about three seconds for her to gather enough mana...and those three seconds were enough for Badd to get another taunt in.

"Well, I can't blame you for wanting to run. You kids can't hope to beat your daddy, after all!"

It was as blatant a taunt as they came. But Badd's expression was just so smug, and the Barn siblings always had been prideful.

"Lelei! You're in command here! You can handle these simpletons on your own!" Kaime exclaimed as he rushed forward with surprising force, unleashing a Celestial Flash in front of him. Badd dodged it like a matador dodging a bull, easily letting Kaime past him. Out of the corner of his eye he watched as Snowbell gracefully let Selm fly past them as well.

Letting the two brothers go was part of the plan. Even if keeping Kaime and Selm here would help turn the battle in their favor, the Liberators had unanimously decided that their father should be the one to handle them.

Snowbell gave Badd a flirtatious wink, which Badd dodged with even more desperation than he had Lelei's disintegration arrow. Technically, a wink wasn't really something that could be dodged, but Badd felt as though he had to dodge it anyway, or something horrible might happen.

"Disgusting. I knew we couldn't trust the relatives of traitors!" Lelei screamed.

"Ha ha ha ha... Don't you think it's cute how easily they get baited?"

"Silence, Knight Hunter!"

Despite the heat in her voice, Lelei kept her cool. She was too seasoned a knight to fall for cheap taunts. She fired one disintegration

arrow mixed with several regular arrows, while simultaneously using wind magic to amplify her voice.

“Devout knights of the church, I have been granted command of this battle! Overwhelm them with numbers! Show these heretics the might of God!”

Her voice was so loud that Badd scrunched up his face in pain. As expected, her command brought a semblance of order back to the knights, reigniting the fire in their eyes.

“Death to all heretics!” she shouted.

“Death to all heretics!” the knights replied in unison. They still hadn’t come to terms with the deaths of their apostles, but they had been reminded of their duty at long last, which gave them the resolve to fight to the end.

“Yikes. We only got...about fifty of them before they rallied,” Badd mumbled. He had been hoping to thin their ranks a bit further, so he clicked his tongue. The bigger problem, though, was that they hadn’t managed to kill any of the knights Badd had seen during the war with the republic, meaning most of the knights that *had* been slain were weaker Templar Knights that had been hurriedly promoted to fill the Holy Templar Knights’ ranks. And yet, they hadn’t even managed to kill a hundred of those weaker knights.

With their morale restored, the Holy Templar Knights quickly began pushing back the Liberators. That gave the regular Templar Knights commanders the leeway to bark out orders to their men.

“It’s time to swat these annoying flies!” Morcus howled, creating a powerful gravity field with him at the center. Howzer, Jacqueline, and Nadia started getting dragged toward him. This was his special magic, Entrapment. It allowed him to drag his enemies closer to him, preventing them from escaping God’s judgment. Once Howzer and the others had come closer, he swung his hammer and halberd at them, sending them all flying.

Groaning, the Liberators quickly got back to their feet. The fight was not going in their favor...and it wasn’t much better for the others either.

“Dammit!”

“Hah, just because you’re a little faster than other people don’t think you’re anything special, you mongrel.”

Kyaty and the others were having just as hard a time dealing with Strass now. Despite her speed, Kyaty was being toyed with. Every time she thought she had him, her daggers cut through empty air, and he was suddenly at her flank, attacking her with his sword and spear. That was all thanks to his special magic, Phantom Waltz, which allowed him to create realistic afterimages that messed with his opponents’ perception. Whenever Kyaty thought she’d dodged one of

his attacks, the real attack came from a different direction, and Chris had to step in to save her. Ned and Mania had both taken serious injuries already and were out of the fight.

Marshal, Shushu, Tony, and Abe didn't have it any easier either.

"Shit, so this is the famous Sword Saint?! For an old geezer, he's pretty tough!"

"For a heretic, you sure are tough!"

Had it not been for Marshal's special magic, he would have been cut down ages ago. His swordsmanship couldn't keep up with Vapla's at all, even with Shushu and the others' attacks taking up some of his attention. And that was thanks to Vapla's special magic, Ten Blades, which allowed him to control eight other floating blades with magic in addition to the two in his hands.

Cloris, Snowbell, and Arsel were all fighting against the rest of the Holy Templar Knights, but they and their men were sorely outnumbered. They all had artifacts imbued with evolution magic that multiplied their stats fivefold, but even then they were still outmatched by the knights and were slowly being backed into a corner.

This apostleification and the weapon replicas all the knights got made them stronger than we anticipated...

If they could just hold out until Miledi took control of the main cathedral, it'd have been Badd and the others' victory, but without those evolution magic artifacts, they might not even have managed to survive for a few minutes.

Breaking out in a cold sweat, Badd surveyed the battlefield before activating his transmitter and saying, "Everyone, focus on staying alive! Adel, hurry up!"

They still hadn't run out of trump cards. In fact, they hadn't used a single one of them yet. Badd smiled fearlessly as the mad scientist Adel Lackman responded, "Don't rush me! Magic's more delicate than you fools will ever understand!"

"Yeah, yeah, my bad!" Badd roared as he glanced over his shoulder and saw Adel working furiously on something near the collapsed entrance of the temple. There was a black coffin-shaped object in front of him, and he was surgically pouring mana into it at various points. Several magic circles repeatedly flickered on and off on the surface of the coffin.

Badd switched his focus back to Lelei, but was, unfortunately, a moment too late.

"Gah!" he shouted, as he was knocked back at the speed of light and slammed into one of the temple's pillars.

Shit, my vision's spinning.

He'd hit the back of his head, hard. Though he'd managed to

dampen the impact as much as possible with godlike reaction time, he'd still taken quite a blow. His brain was howling in pain.

So those are the Paladins I heard so much about, huh?

Indeed, it was not Lelei who had hit him, but a Paladin wielding a massive warhammer who had rushed out from the depths of the temple. On the breastplate of his holy armor was an insignia of a shield surrounded by a halo.

The Paladin was none other than Seys, the same man who'd defeated Vandre's Uruluk with his Invisible Judgment.

"This is the end, Knight Hunter!"

Lelei unleashed another disintegration arrow at Badd while he was reeling from the impact of Seys's hammer. However, an unexpected shield formed to protect Badd.

"What?!" Lelei shouted in surprise. A dark-gray liquid had spilled out of Badd's pocket and solidified into a surprisingly sturdy shield. Badd chuckled as the arrow crumpled upon hitting it.

"Our synergist is the best in the world at making adaptable gadgets."

Oscar had made artifact equipment for all of the Liberators, so even their clothes had multiple defensive functions and were made out of super-sturdy metal threads. The liquid that Badd returned to his pocket was the pinnacle of the defensive artifacts Oscar had distributed to everyone.

It was known as Metal Slime Batlam. Though it had no will of its own, it was a fusion of metamorphosis magic and creation magic that could harden automatically to cushion impacts and protect its user. Moreover, Oscar had come up with countermeasures for each of the trump cards the church had already shown.

"Commander Lelei, I have an urgent report! The effects of our debuff magic appear to be neutralized!"

"Gah, but we only ever showed that to the heretics once!"

In fact, Oscar had only ever heard about the debuff spell, not seen it, but he was such a skilled synergist that a secondhand account had been enough intel for him to work with.

The nape of Badd's neck prickled, and a second later, he felt a burning sensation on his skin.

"Shit."

A tendril of smoky, poisonous mana appeared from the other side of the pillar and attempted to envelop Badd.

"Vorp! Slash!" Chris shouted, cutting the pillar right above Badd's head, nearly clipping him in the process. However, before Badd could complain, he saw a knight with a spear tumble away from right behind him.

"The Paladin that can use corrosion magic!"

Badd had read the reports on Torres. He hadn't realized he'd let the dangerous Paladin get so close to him, so he quickly put some distance between them right after saying that.

Lelei clicked her tongue and trained her disintegration arrow on Chris. However—

“Impossible! No one but the Knight Hunter should possess a weapon that can absorb mana!”

Chris easily sliced the arrow in half with his blade.

“He he he, bet you didn't think a pirate would have such a fancy sword,” he said, standing back-to-back with Badd.

Though technically, Chris's sword let him cut through mana rather than absorb it, just like the Demon Lord's sword, Ignis. All of the Liberators' weapons had been enchanted to do the same. It was one of the many countermeasures Oscar had come up with for the apostles' disintegration magic.

At that exact moment, a gentle beam of light rained down on Badd. It was a slightly lighter shade of orange than Meiru's mana, and a second later, his wounds healed up.

“Thanks, Diene!” Badd shouted. Diene gave him a thumbs-up in response from her post next to Adel. In her other hand, she held a trident with an aqua-colored jewel set into its shaft. It was an artifact that had been made specifically for Diene, who could use renewal magic.

Things had been looking rather dicey for the Liberators for a moment there, but they steadily fought their way back to a stalemate with the knights.

Diene's magic helped heal anyone who got injured, turning it into a battle of attrition.

“Hey, where's my thanks? I saved your neck from that Paladin.”

“Whoops, sorry, Chris, but I've got a policy of never thanking dudes.”

“I see. No wonder all the ladies hate you.”

“Fuck you!”

Badd and Chris continued to insult each other as Badd absorbed Torres's corrosive attacks with Egness and Chris cut down every arrow Lelei fired.

“Quit playing around, you morons! Do you want me to blow you up?!” Arsel Blare, captain of the Esperado branch, shouted.

“Whaaat?! We're sorry!” Badd and Chris replied in unison.

Arsel was one of the most intimidating members of the Liberators, and he looked exceptionally pissed. He was currently engaged in a long-range duel with Seys. His special magic, Explosion, let him blow up any location within his line of sight. However, Seys was also skilled in invisible ranged warfare and was fighting back with his own

Invisible Judgment.

Arsel was trusting his Metal Slime Batlam to defend him, while continuing to bombard Seys and prevent the knight from attacking anyone else.

“Snowbell!” Badd shouted.

“Kyaty!” Chris said at the same time.

They needed the sturdy Snowbell and the speedy Kyaty to back Arsel up, or he’d be overwhelmed. And so, the two of them responded instantly. If Seys was given even a moment’s respite, he’d be able to lock onto someone and snipe them with ease.

With the Liberators both outmatched and lower in power, they couldn’t have Seys taking out their healer.

“Someone get that filthy dagon girl!” Lelei shouted, realizing who was the pillar of the Liberators’ defense.

“Hah, bring it on!” Diene shouted back.

“Hey, don’t antagonize her!”

“Don’t forget, we’re the ones who have to protect you!”

For a healer, Diene was surprisingly aggressive. Velinka’s branch chief, Odio Straff, who was one of the Liberators’ best barrier masters, desperately deployed as many shields as he could to protect Diene and Adel from the sudden flood of Celestial Flashes heading their way. Meanwhile, Eevee used her thorn-covered whip to keep the charging knights at bay.

“My, you pirates really have a strong-willed princess on your hands,” Adel’s butler, Henriette, said as he picked off isolated knights with his poisoned needles.

No normal twelve-year-old would have been able to maintain her composure with an army of bloodthirsty knights trying to kill her. And yet, there wasn’t even the slightest hint of fear in Diene’s eyes. Her resolve remained as unwavering as ever. But then, a second later, her face twisted in pain.

“Aghhh!”

An eerie wail could be heard from the depths of the temple.

Diene looked down and saw a red stain on her chest. She let out a small gasp of surprise, then crumpled to the ground.

“Diene?!” Adel shouted in surprise, prompting Odio and the others to turn around. They couldn’t understand how Diene had been hit with the barrier still functional.

“There’s... There’s one more knight who can use space-altering magic!” Adel turned to where he’d heard that wail from as he said that, and saw who the assailant was; a female knight standing in front of the altar. She was receiving treatment from the few Holy Templar Knights who specialized in healing magic. Actually, it was hard to be sure she really was a knight. Unlike the others, all she was wearing

was a simple priestess's robe, and her sole weapon was a small knife. That knife was covered in blood, as was the girl's chest.

In truth, she was the Paladin Niety. She was in her late teens and covered in scars. Her wide-open eyes looked unnatural as well.

Niety's special magic was Martyrdom, and that was what had allowed her to stab Diene in the chest. Her magic allowed her to share her own injuries with someone else.

Cackling to herself, her wide-open eyes trained on Badd next.

"Oh shit."

Arsel took his eyes off of Seys for a second to fire an Explosion at Niety. His biggest Explosion yet was powerful enough to blow her and the knights healing her away. However, it also granted Seys the opportunity to get a hit in on Arsel.

Metal Slime Batlam got between the two just in time, but it wasn't fast enough to harden, so the blow to the back of Arsel's head instantly knocked him unconscious. Blood dripped from Arsel's eyes and nose; the wound was fatal.

At the same time, Snowbell and Kyaty were sent flying. Without Arsel's explosions to keep Seys at bay, he was free to attack everyone with impunity. Chris, Shushu, and Howzer were taken down a second later. Their defensive artifacts barely kept them alive, but they were in no position to keep fighting.

The stalemate that had held for the last few minutes was broken.

"Ha ha ha, looks like this is the end for you!" Morcus shouted, closing in on Jacqueline. Without Howzer's backup, she stood no chance against him. She barely managed to avoid a fatal blow from the first swing of Morcus's halberd, losing one of her arms in the process.

Nadia and the others leaped in to aid her, but Morcus simply used Entrapment to throw them off-balance, then sent them flying with a Celestial Flash.

"You fought well, for a bunch of heretics."

"Gaaaaaaaah!" Marshal screamed, charging at Vapla. Tony and Abe were already too injured to put up much of a fight, so Vapla left them to the other knights. Bringing all ten swords to bear against Marshal, he sliced right through the sturdy man's Diamond Skin.

"Goddammit, just hit already!" Cloris screamed, advancing on Strass.

"Hmph, no filthy mongrel could ever hope to reach me."

Cloris used a pair of detachable scissors to fight in a rather unorthodox manner, but even with her tricky attacks and Ned and Mania backing her up, she couldn't land a single blow on Strass, while he kept countering her at every turn.

Kyaty was just as battered as she tried to fight Seys without Arsel's

help.

“Don’t underestimate pirates!”

A short distance away, Snowbell had been utterly defeated, their arm and jaw a bloody mess.

There wasn’t a single fighter on the Liberators’ side who was doing well. Swallowing the urge to throw in the towel, Kyaty forced herself to keep fighting. Ducking low, she circled Seys and swung a dagger at his back.

“Pathetic.”

An attack she’d thought had been coming from in front of her hit her in the side. This had happened over a dozen times now. Had it not been for her Metal Slime Batlam, she would have died ages ago. And after the pounding it had taken, her Metal Slime Batlam had lost some of its mass and thus its defensive potential. Indeed, even after blocking this latest attack from Seys, Kyaty could still feel her collarbone crack.

The girl landed on all fours like a cat, coughing up blood. She glared at Seys, but he just stared coolly at her, his eyes entirely devoid of emotion.

“This battle is over. I imagine you stayed here to buy time for Miledi Reisen, but your star of hope can’t save you.”

“Shut the fuck up! Miledi and the others will definitely—”

“I just received a report that Oscar Orcus was defeated.”

“What?”

“He was hit by an apostle’s disintegration attack. None of the Paladins have even been injured. It’s only a matter of time before Miledi falls as well.”

All strength left Kyaty’s limbs. She hung her head, her ears and tail drooping.

“That broke you, huh? Well, it’s for the best,” Seys mumbled as he hefted his warhammer. “Taste the invisible wrath of God, you—”

“Gya ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Analysis complete! Orcus’s artifact really is something else!” Adel’s grating laugh cut through Seys’s proclamation, and the usually calm knight gave him a look of surprise. A second later, he shouted, “Purge Reversal!”

The coffin that Diene had kept her hands on despite the hole in her chest emitted a powerful glow, swallowing the entire battlefield.

“What in the...?” Seys mumbled as he staggered backward, feeling some of his strength leave him. The Holy Templar Knights looked shaken as well.

“Looks like we bought enough time after all,” Kyaty said, baring her fangs in a fearless grin.

“Ngh...” Seys had thought telling her Oscar had been killed would break her, but that had been far from the case. But while that was unexpected, Seys quickly regained his composure. Even with his own

stats lowered, he was confident he was stronger than the Liberators.

“Our advantage remains unchanged!” he shouted, rallying the Holy Templar Knights. His voice boomed through the temple, and the knights quickly regained their composure as well.

Unfortunately, their morale only lasted a few seconds.

“Forest Manifestor!” a beautiful voice called out, making the knights look around in confusion.

Everything around them was green. The temple had been overrun with greenery. Vines and weeds sprouted from the broken rubble of the walls and pillars. The seeds that had been spread through the battlefield grew into trees at an unbelievable speed.

“This...isn’t good. Burn the trees down!” Torres shouted in a panic, activating his own corrosive magic to hack away at the greenery. Unfortunately for him, it was too late. The queen of the forest ruled this battlefield now.

The plants sprayed a white mist into the air, bathing the temple in it...and that wasn’t all either.

“Unlimited Overdrive.”

The queen of the forest’s ultimate evolution magic reached all of the Liberators as well. Each and every one of them was enveloped in a bright green light.

“Phew, I almost died there—Revival Field!”

Even Diene, who’d been stabbed in the heart, was in good health once more. Despite the lethal wound she’d received, she’d remained conscious just long enough to cast revival magic on herself. And now that she’d been boosted with evolution magic, she was able to heal herself instantly instead of slowly. Moreover, evolution magic had allowed her to expand her magic into a zone that covered the entire battlefield and healed only her allies.

Arsel went from being at death’s door to fully healed in a second.

“How long are you gonna just sit there?! Get ’em already!” Arsel shouted to Badd as he used his Explosion to blow away Torres’s corruption mist.

“Yeah, yeah. It’s time for a massacre, EgxeEEEEEs!” Badd roared as he spun Egxess like a dervish, unleashing a total of three hundred black shock waves upon his enemies. Two hundred of them went for Torres, while the remaining hundred sought out the Holy Templar Knights.

The evolution-magic-powered shock waves tore through the knights’ holy armors, killing quite a few of them.

“Ngh, his movements are nothing like before!” Lelei grunted as she fired another arrow of light at Badd. However, it was far weaker than before. Badd simply batted it aside like he would a pebble.

Strass was being pushed back now as well.

“Ngh, so this is the power of the Pale Forest’s mists?!”

“Hah, you finally showed an opening!”

The mists interfered with Strass’s Spectral Waltz, making it easier to spot the real version of him. He stumbled over a tree root, and Cloris pounced on his momentary weakness. She split her scissors into two blades and slashed wildly at him. One blade cut through only an illusion, but the other sliced Strass’s upper arm.

“Hah, a scratch like this won’t even—”

“Lash out—Pain Enhancer!”

Strass shrieked in pain as Cloris’s special magic, Pain Manipulation, ate into him. She could use it to both dampen the pain of her allies and magnify the pain of her foes. And thanks to Lyutillis’s evolution magic, she could make even scratches feel like torture.

“Now’s our chance!”

“Quit scurrying around, you cockroaches!” Mania exclaimed as he created a barrage of flaming spears and flung them at Strass. A group of knights rushed forward with shields to protect their captain, but Ned sent them flying with his fists.

Realizing he was in a pickle, Strass turned to Morcus for help. However, Morcus was in a pinch as well.

“He he he, what an ugly fucking face. He looks like an ogre who just got done rolling in dog shit,” Nadia said as she ducked under Morcus’s halberd swing and hit him with a palm thrust.

“You really go all-out on the insults once you have the upper hand, huh?!”

“You bet your ass I do, Bakara! At least this guy deserves it!”

“Did the evolution magic enhance your cussing ability too?!”

Morcus hadn’t expected a simple palm thrust to do much to him, especially with his holy armor equipped, but he found himself coughing up blood.

“It finally worked! That’s what you get, you fucking piece of shit!”

Even though Nadia’s job was healer and she was literally a doctor, she was fighting on the front lines rather than staying with Diene...and the reason for that was that Nadia Piscott was a master of unarmed martial arts. Moreover, she incorporated healing magic into her fighting style. She overheated her opponent’s organs, causing them to work so hard they destroyed themselves.

Her special magic, Mana Penetrator, allowed her to directly apply mana to her patients’ bodies to heal them more effectively, but it also let her bypass her opponents’ defenses to destroy their innards. Before, the effects of the knights’ holy armor and their apostleification had kept her own magic at bay, but now that Morcus’s stats had been lowered and hers boosted through evolution magic, she could actually make use of her ability.

On top of all that, Bakara was using his special magic, Quicksand, to ruin Morcus's footing, while Solas threw a barrage of scalpels at him. All of those scalpels were coated with Solas's specially made poison, created with his special magic, Toxic Excretion.

Suffice it to say, Morcus was in no position to help Strass. So instead, Strass turned to Vapla, but he was also similarly occupied.

"How are you so hard?!"

"Hah, and you call yourself the church's Sword Saint?!"

None of Vapla's swords could touch Marshal. His own swordsmanship and armor protected him from most of the slashes, and those that got through were stymied by his Diamond Skin. Marshal truly did live up to his title of Unbreakable Shield.

Furthermore, now that Shushu, Tony, and Abe had been healed by revival magic, they could rejoin the fray.

"Die, you bastard!"

"Oh snap, Shushu's lost it. Abe, make sure you don't get in her way!"

"Don't need to tell me twice. No way I'm dying to friendly fire after coming this far!"

Tony and Abe took care of the surrounding knights, while Shushu helped push Vapla back.

"Match your timing with mine, Jacqueline!"

"Of course, Howzer-sama!"

Meanwhile, Howzer and Jacqueline came over to help finish Vapla off. Jacqueline's wind magic blew away the two swords at Vapla's back, leaving him wide open. Howzer then leaped forward and swung down at the man's unguarded back with his prosthetic arm.

"Ngh!"

"Tch, I can't believe you parried a blow that heavy!"

Vapla blocked Marshal's claymore with one of the swords in his hands while parrying Howzer's blow with the other. But while his godlike skill kept him alive, fully redirecting such heavy blows was impossible, so his left arm paid the price.

"At this rate... Gah! Lelei, bring out our trump card!" Vapla exclaimed as he recalled the two blades Jacqueline had blown away and nursed his damaged left arm.

"But if we do that—"

"Look at our current situation! We can't afford to hold anything in reserve now! Unless we destroy that coffin, we'll lose!"

"R-Roger!"

Vapla glanced over at the coffin-shield Adel was holding. Now that Adel didn't have to devote his entire attention to the coffin, he was firing off artillery blasts of powerful composite magic.

Lelei quickly realized that unless they did something about the

coffin and recovered their stat advantage, they wouldn't last. Even if it meant unveiling a trump card that was a double-edged sword, they had to crush it instantly

Lelei gave the signal, and one of the Holy Templar Knights ran over to the temple's far wall. He started pouring mana into a magic circle that had been hidden by a tapestry. The pillar closest to that wall soon began rotating upward into the ceiling like a screw. The hole it left behind was actually a staircase leading down.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

The roar of a waking beast reverberated through the temple. When Badd and the others saw what walked up the staircase, they all broke out into a cold sweat.

"What the hell is that...?"

"Hey, is that really one of the church's sacred beasts? It looks more like a fucking monster."

The creature was shaped roughly like a human, but it didn't look anything like one. For one thing, it was three meters tall. Moreover, its skin was a grotesque mixture of flesh and bits of armor that appeared to have fused with the thing. Its fingers had been replaced with wicked metal claws, its legs were prosthetic, and there were two pulsing red stones in its body, one on its forehead and the other in its chest. And to cap it all off, boiling white magma spilled from its mouth.

"Vice-captain— I mean, Araym! If you have any pride as a knight left, then kill those heretics!" Lelei shouted, pointing to Adel. Chris and the others had fought Araym once on the western seas, and they looked utterly shocked.

Araym Orcman had once been the vice-commander of the Holy Templar Knights, but he looked nothing like his former self now. The only similarity at all was that the white magma resembled his Divine Blaze special magic.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

It was hard to tell whether Araym's roar was a response to Lelei's command.

"Wha—?! Wait, vice-captain, don't—"

But a second later, it became clear that it wasn't. The stone on his chest pulsed, and he swiped at the knight who'd activated the magic circle with his right hand. His metal claws ripped through the knight's armor like paper.

"L-

Laaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaausssssssssssssssssssshhhhhhhhhhhh!"

There was nothing but rage left in what remained of Araym's mind. He'd devolved into an unthinking, unfeeling beast, but his hatred for his former commander remained.

With another howl, he opened his mouth and unleashed a torrent of magma into the temple. It destroyed everything in its path, whether that was plant life, Liberators, or even Holy Templar Knights.

None of the Liberators' Metal Slime Batlams were able to protect them. Because the magma was liquid, it was able to flow through even the tiniest cracks in the Batlams' shields and utterly liquefy flesh in seconds. Screams of knights and Liberators alike filled the room.

"Get the fuck out of here, you monster!" Kyaty shouted, climbing up onto the creature's shoulder and sticking a dagger right into its right eye. Perhaps this thing had been Araym once, but after fusing with so many artifacts, it was now nothing more than a mindless beast. Chris was able to handle Seys on his own, so she'd gone to take care of this new threat.

"Lauuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuss!"

"Ugh, that's gross!"

The creature tried to swat Kyaty like a fly with its claws, but she was faster. Leaping straight up, she somersaulted through the air, created a gravity platform with her artifact boots, and kicked off it to go straight down and stick her remaining dagger in the creature's left eye.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Are you kidding me?! He's still not dead?!"

The creature unleashed another torrent of magma, and Kyaty leaped away right in the nick of time. As she landed on all fours, she pulled two more kukri knives from the sheaths on her thighs.

She kept her back low, like a cat, as she prepared to continue her battle with the creature formerly known as Araym.

"Die! I kill...heretics...traitors!"

"Hah, good luck! No one can keep up with my speed!"

It seemed the creature still had a modicum of sanity left, yet it left the daggers stuck in its eyes as it breathed another gout of magma.

"I'll take care of this guy! Diene, focus on healing everyone!"

"Okay!"

Diene had been overawed when the creature had appeared, but Kyaty's words reminded her to try to save as many of her comrades as possible.

Kyaty accelerated and accelerated until both her body and mind were at their limits. She had to watch out for those razor-sharp retractable claws as well as the magma balls the creature was spitting at her. But somehow, she managed to dodge them all and slip in for an attack every time the creature left an opening.

To everyone else, she simply looked like a white blur. She leaped around the battlefield, always staying one step ahead of her quarry. Now that she'd been boosted with evolution magic, there really wasn't

anyone who could keep up with her speed.

Unfortunately, the creature was quite formidable as well. Or rather, it didn't care how many of its allies died to friendly fire, so it didn't take the knights' positioning into account as it blindly struck at Kyaty.

"I can't believe you brought out something like that. At this rate, you'll all be killed by him too," Badd said to Torres and Lelei in an exasperated voice.

Eyes bloodshot, Lelei retorted, "If that's what it takes to slaughter you heretics, then it'll be worth it! The Holy Templar Knights do not fear death! Martyrdom is an honor! We won't stop until you kill every last one of us, or we've eradicated you all!"

"Yeah, I figured."

Had they been willing to surrender, Badd would have accepted it, but he'd expected them to fight to the death.

Suddenly, Diene cried out in surprise, and Badd glanced back to see what had happened. It didn't take long to find the cause.

"Another apostle, huh?"

There was a giant pillar of silver light outside, and the shock wave it had created had caused Diene to stagger backward. Someone was fighting with an apostle high up in the sky. Chances were it was Vandre.

Badd couldn't help but wonder how Vandre was faring. He knew his job was just to keep the Holy Templar Knights occupied, but...

"Hmph, can any of your comrades handle an apostle without Miledi Reisen?" Lelei asked triumphantly. She was certain only Miledi could pull off a trick like killing three apostles instantly with a single spell. And since Miledi was gone, Lelei was certain this battle was won now that an apostle had joined the fray.

However, Badd just grinned fearlessly.

"Oh, they can. We wouldn't have come here if they couldn't. Every last one of our ancient magic users is a bona fide monster. Isn't that right, Naiz?!"

A second later, an earthquake rippled across the battlefield. Looking back, Lelei saw that the creature they'd brought out had been slammed into the ceiling. Furthermore, its legs had been cut off and they dropped to the ground with a sickening crunch.

"H-Hey! You nearly got me with that attack too!"

"Uhhh... Well, even if I had hit you, Diene could have patched you back up."

"What, so you can chop me to pieces because Diene can put me back together? I thought Meiru was the sadist, not you! Don't let her rub off on you!"

Indeed, it was Naiz who had effortlessly taken care of the

creature, and in the process nearly made mincemeat out of Kyaty.

“How’d things go, Naiz?!” Badd shouted.

“All good! I’ve teleported all of the prisoners out!”

That had been Naiz’s other objective aside from destroying the means of quickly reaching the main cathedral.

All of the prisoners had, of course, been heretics. They hadn’t been Liberators, just small-scale heretics the church had captured beforehand and hadn’t even deemed worthy of execution. Most of them had been used as test subjects or tortured for information.

When Miledi had heard from Laus that was what happened to heretics that didn’t get executed, rescuing them had, of course, become one of her top priorities. While he’d been at it, Naiz had also secured Licoris and Debra. Naturally, neither of them had wanted to go, but Laus cared about them as well. This way, Laus could fight without worry.

Another shower of silver beams flashed high up in the sky. Seeing that, Badd growled, “In that case, go wild up there! We can handle things over here!”

“Gotcha.”

“Ngh, wait!” Lelei shouted, but of course, Naiz had no reason to listen to her. He opened a portal and vanished without a second thought.

“All right, boys, we’re in the homestretch now! Give it all you’ve got! It’s time to bring down the church once and for all!” Badd shouted.

“Hell yeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” everyone screamed in reply, sounding overjoyed. More than a few Liberators had perished, and they were still at a numerical disadvantage. And yet, their spirits remained unbroken.

“Martyrdom is the greatest honor a knight can hope to achieve! Take as many of those heretics down with you as you can!” Lelei shouted in reply, and the knights cheered as well.

Unfortunately for them, there was a wide gulf between those who fought for survival and a better future, and those who fought to die, clinging to the past.

Meanwhile, in the sky above the palace, five hundred gleaming white holy dragons did battle with six hundred wyverns decked out in armor black as pitch.

Though Mulm dearly wished to end Laus’s life with his own hands, he was loyal to his duty. As the commander of the church’s most mobile unit, he knew it was his job to lead his men to the main cathedral as soon as possible. And that duty was especially important now that Miledi Reisen had shown that she could defeat apostles with

ease.

Mulm had hoped to overwhelm Miledi with numbers and, if possible, kill her to raise the church's morale, but he hadn't even been able to reach the cathedral, let alone fight Miledi.

"Impossible, impossible, impossible, impossible!" he shouted over and over in a mad rage as he fired his bow as fast as he could. Every arrow he loosed was a disintegration arrow, and though he needed to rely on the power of his Sacred Bow, he could fire them without needing to charge up like Lelei. And each of them were, of course, aimed at Vandre, who had sprouted dragon wings to help him fly.

"I'm tired of seeing the same trick over and over," he said lazily, batting all of the arrows aside with a twirl of his massive black greatsword. The move greatly resembled the way Badd twirled his scythe to block attacks. The sword was all Vandre needed to both defend and attack, since it had the ability to cut through mana like all of Oscar's artifacts.

"Adra!" Mulm shouted.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

With a vicious roar, his prized dragon unleashed its breath at Vandre. Adra's breath was more powerful than ten knights casting Divine Wrath at once. However, Vandre didn't even bother dodging.

"Uruluk, Batlam!"

Instead, he simply called to his two strongest familiars for aid. Uruluk completely ignored the attack heading for his master and fired his own breath at Adra from the side. Meanwhile, Vandre's muffler, which was actually Batlam, expanded into a large shield to deflect the aurora blast.

Because Adra had to stay still to fire his blast, Uruluk's hit him dead-on. Screaming in pain, Adra spiraled away toward the ground. There was a huge hole in the dragon's stomach, and blood rained down on the palace below.

Mulm quickly healed Adra with magic, but he couldn't help gritting his teeth in frustration. The guardian of the capital, the church's strongest dragon, wasn't even able to put up a fight against Vandre and his familiars. Adra's breath had never once reached Vandre, and he'd been seriously injured multiple times now. Even though Mulm's apostleification had also buffed his dragon, and Adra was far tougher than he'd been during the war with the republic, the battle before them seemed hopeless.

"What are you doing?! Seal their movements!"

"We're trying, but they're too tough!"

"And too fast!"

All of Vandre's wyverns boasted jet-black artifact armor crafted by Oscar, as well as evolved scales that were too tough for the Paragons'

dragons to pierce. A barrage of concentrated attacks on one spot could still punch through the wyverns' scales, but they were so fast that even getting one direct hit was difficult. Plus, the armor healed their injuries over time.

"Quit whining and fight! We have the advantage in numbers, so overwhelm them!" Mulm exclaimed. He was normally a mild-mannered commander, but right now, he didn't have the energy to hide his frustration. Resigned, ten of his knights tried to surround Uruluk.

"We won't let you get in Van-sama's way!"

But like every other time they'd tried, Margaretta blocked them off. Getting in between the knights and Uruluk, she fired an unbelievably powerful barrage of flaming spears at them. And at the same time, she raised her jet-black bow at the knights and fired a barrage of arrows as well. Each arrow was made of the hardest alloy transmutation could create, and enchanted with every auxiliary magic effect known to man, including soul magic to hone in on enemies. To make matters worse, the wyvern Margaretta was riding also fired its dragonbreath at the knights, and that breath was also enhanced by the artifact jewel ensconced in its helm.

Two of the knights weren't able to dodge in time and were sent crashing to the ground together with their dragons. Any time any of Mulm's men tried to attack Vandre, the Schnee warriors got in their way.

Margaretta's handpicked squad was composed of only elites. Since they were mostly half-breeds, they had the physical toughness of beastmen that allowed them to withstand the strenuous aerial maneuvers their wyverns could pull off, while also possessing the magical aptitude of demons. Additionally, they had the magical skill they'd been forced to acquire due to the experiments they'd endured, and a slew of world-class artifacts crafted for them by Oscar. All of them were focused on protecting Vandre, leaving the rest of the knights to his wyvern familiars. That way, they were able to make up for the numbers disparity against Vandre, which was shrinking by the moment as more and more knights fell.

Shit. If only the unit on the ground was free to help the Holy Templar Knights.

Mulm glanced down, but his unit of divine wolves was still stuck battling Kuou's own pack of ice wolves. They, too, were being pushed back by Vandre's familiars. Of course, they wouldn't have been of any use in an aerial battle, but if they'd been unoccupied they could have gone to assist the Holy Templar Knights in the central temple.

While Mulm was distracted, Uruluk roared and unleashed another blast of dragonbreath at him. Adra managed to twist away just in

time, but the breath had just been a feint.

“Can you really afford to look away right now?” Vandre asked calmly from behind.

“Shi—” Mulm gasped as he looked over his shoulder to see Vandre’s greatsword coming down on him. He crossed his wings in front of him to block the attack, and lucky for him, those white wings were sturdy enough that they could withstand even the space-cutting effects of Vandre’s sword. However, they couldn’t blunt all of the impact, so Mulm was knocked off his saddle. He righted himself midair and fired a barrage of white feathers up at Vandre, while also unleashing a disintegration arrow at him.

“He’s too fast...” Mulm muttered in awe as he watched Vandre use his own wings to maneuver and dodge the feathers by a hair’s breadth while slicing the disintegration arrow in half with his sword. Spinning like a top, Vandre then flew over to Mulm’s flank. He was clearly far more used to flight than Mulm was.

Seeing the sword coming for his neck, Mulm reflexively raised his bow to block. But just then, Vandre’s movements slowed and he let out a small groan. Taking advantage of the opening, Mulm danced out of the way. Breathing hard and covered in sweat, he looked over at the person who’d saved him from an untimely demise.

“My thanks, Besshu-dono!”

“I’m sorry, Van-sama!” Tordretta, who looked like a mini Margareta, shouted at the same time. She was another one of the Schnee squad leaders, and she’d been facing off against Besshu and his Seraphic Eye, which could cripple anyone he looked at with numerous debilitating status effects.

Feeling despondent about her failure, Tordretta hurriedly launched her lightning-enhanced boomerang at Besshu to break his eye contact with Vandre.

“No need to panic, Tordretta! We’re wearing them down, so don’t worry!”

“Got it, Van-sama!”

Tordretta beamed, then turned back to Besshu and shouted, “But I’ll get at least one hit on you! This is for Van-samaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Her squad bombarded Besshu from all sides while she launched herself at him to grapple in melee range.

“I’m not dead, you know...?” Vandre muttered under his breath.

Thanks to Adel reversing the debuff spell the knights were using, as well the Schnee clan’s innate magical resistance and their wyverns’ ability to zip around at high speeds, Tordretta and the others were just barely managing to keep themselves safe from the effects of Besshu’s Seraphic Eye, but Vandre was worried she might lose that edge if she lost her cool. There was no need for her to force herself to take Besshu

out anyway, since their plan to whittle down the knights was working.

Infuriated by how unperturbed Vandre had acted throughout the fight, Mulm shouted, “You damned heretic, you think we’re beneath you?!”

“Ain’t that obvious?”

Upon hearing that, Mulm was so angry he couldn’t even speak. Vandre idly rested his greatsword on his shoulder, watching Mulm go red in the face with rage.

“It’s not worth losing any of our forces in this preliminary skirmish, so we’re taking it easy,” he stated, taunting Mulm even further.

That finally caused Mulm to snap and he screamed, “Adraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Mulm unleashed a massive burst of mana, which was immediately absorbed by Adra, who then unleashed a blistering breath attack at Margaretta’s squad.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Mulm was willing to kill his own comrades to take some of Vandre’s men down, but Margaretta had been expecting this attack, so she directed her squad to quickly descend out of the way. Thus, the burning light of execution fell only on Mulm’s comrades, vaporizing dozens of knights in an instant.

Meanwhile, Uruluk flew over to Adra’s flank and used the second special magic it had gained thanks to Lyutillis’s evolution magic, Shock Wave Bellow. Its roar was empowered by supersonic vibrations that ripped through Adra’s innards, forcing it to stop its breath as blood spurted from its eyes and nose. Adra then swiveled to face Uruluk and charged at lighting speed.

Mulm’s rage seemed to have affected Adra as well, and the dragon wasn’t thinking clearly. Surrounding itself in an aura of pure white light, Adra attempted to tear out the neck of the wyvern that had interrupted it so often.

“Raaaaaaah!”

“Gaaaaaaah?!”

Uruluk neatly somersaulted out of the way of Adra’s charge, then slammed its tail—which was coated in spiked armor—into Adra’s head. The blow was enhanced with Uruluk’s mana conversion ability, as well as by the force of Adra’s own charge, since it had basically run right into the spikes.

The force of the blow was too much for Adra’s scales to absorb, and its skull was practically crushed, its eyes popping out of its head. Going limp, the dragon barely managed to keep itself airborne. Though it was barely clinging on to life, and its pride kept it from letting itself fall, Adra was clearly defeated. This was the end.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Uruluk took after his master, and like Vandre, he had no mercy for his foes. Thus, the wyvern gathered all of the vast reserves of mana stored in his artifact armor near his jaws.

“Adra! Get out of the—!”

Before Mulm could finish his warning, Uruluk unleashed his most powerful breath attack yet at Adra. Flames hot enough to scorch the very air punched through Adra’s stomach. The force of the blast sent Adra careening into the Divine Mountain with enough force to break off massive chunks of it. But before the rocks could fall onto the palace below, they were vaporized from the heat of Uruluk’s breath.

After the burning beam of breath finally dissipated, Mulm could see that an entire section of the mountainside had been turned to glass...and Adra’s corpse was embedded within it, a gaping hole in its stomach.

“Impossible...” he muttered in disbelief. His shock left him wide open, and he didn’t even notice that Vandre had flown far above him. What returned him to his senses, however, was seeing Besshu go flying past him, one of his arms missing.

“Gah!” the paladin shouted, blood streaming from his gaping wound.

“I did it!” Tordretta shouted jubilantly, seemingly unconcerned with the holes in her shoulder and thighs. Vandre wished she hadn’t pushed herself so hard, but he smiled at her nonetheless. He then looked down at Mulm.

“Now then, I think it’s time to end this. If my hunch is right, she’ll be here soon, so I can’t be dealing with you guys and her at the same time.”

“You bast—huh? What the—?”

Once he finally looked up, Mulm realized how much trouble he was in. Vandre’s wyverns had surrounded the Paragons of Light. More than two hundred of the sacred dragons had been killed, while only forty of Vandre’s wyverns had died. On top of that, all of the Schnee warriors were alive and well.

Of course, the dragons still outnumbered the wyverns three to one, so it wasn’t a perfect encirclement or anything. However, it was enough to keep the Paragons penned in...and Vandre was above it all.

“See ya,” he said lightly, dropping his sword down at the grouped mass of Paragons of Light. Mulm watched in confusion as it came to a stop in the middle of them.

Meanwhile, Margaretta and the others took out pale black twelve-sided crystals and raised them into the air.

This isn’t good... Mulm thought as a chill ran down his spine. “Everyone, scatter!”

Unfortunately, the cage was completed before anyone could move.

Beams of light shot out of the greatsword toward the twelve crystals Margareta and the others were holding. Magic circles appeared on the surface of the crystals, and then they too shot out beams of light toward each other.

The five hundred dragons and their riders were now trapped in an icosahedron.

“Commander, we can’t leave!”

“A barrier? Concentrate your breath attacks at one point!”

However, before Mulm and the others could even try to escape, the second part of the spell activated...and the space within the barrier began to warp and the barrier itself began to shrink in response.

“Are you planning on crushing us to death?!” Mulm shouted.

“Oh, come on, I know you’re not that weak,” Vandre replied.

This wasn’t just a simple barrier. Vandre knew that enough disintegration attacks would be able to break it with time, so shrinking it until it crushed everyone would take too long. However, the spatial distortion inside the barrier began to spread from the center, swallowing up any knights it touched.

This was the domain-creating artifact, Monster House. Essentially, Oscar had created a type of Treasure Trove with the sword as its locus. He’d filled the space inside that Treasure Trove with tens of thousands of monsters, which the knights now had to fight.

“I know I said we were fighting with quality over quantity, but I lied,” Vandre said with a boastful grin. At the end of the day, war was all about numbers.

Mulm tried to shout something, but he too was swallowed up before he could. There was a limit to how many living things that space could accept at once, so Vandre had needed to thin the Paragons’ numbers first, but once that was done, he’d been able to take care of the rest all in one go.

At this point, the Paragons of Light had been more or less eliminated. The church probably hadn’t been expecting to lose one of their three pillars, so Vandre expected powerful reinforcements to come and try and balance the scales. And naturally, his prediction was right on the money.

“I knew you’d come!” he shouted as a beam of silver light streaked toward Margareta. Vandre then stepped into the line of fire, causing the apostle that had fired the beam to scoff.

“People evolve, but I guess dolls can’t do that, huh?” he said, and Batlam opened its mouth wide to swallow the beam whole. The slime’s mouth glowed with a thin film of light as it absorbed the disintegration attack. Batlam then opened up a second mouth and fired the beam right back at the apostle.

There was a gate made of chains inside the part of its slime where its second mouth was. Since Batlam was made of liquid, he could disassemble and reassemble the gate at will, allowing him to both defend and attack with just one portal.

The apostle cut at the beam with her hand, dissipating it with ease. Then, she descended until she was level with Vandre and cocked her head. It was strange seeing human-like mannerisms coming from an emotionless doll.

“Our Lord isn’t very happy with how this game is playing out.”

“And so we’ve come to crush one of your pieces,” another apostle added as it appeared out of thin air, next to the first one.

Ehit wanted to see the Liberators struggle, so there was no fun in watching the church get one-sidedly pummeled. Thus, he’d sent two apostles to crush Vandre and punish Miledi by giving her a taste of despair.

Both apostles readied their blades, exuding waves of silver mana.

“Van-sama!”

“Stay back, Margaretta!” Vandre roared as he held out a hand to keep the Schnee warriors from coming to his aid. He wasn’t telling them not to get involved because he was worried about their safety, but because he had a more important job for them. Smiling fearlessly, he said, “Go help the others fighting at the gates! The western gate especially needs air support! Once that’s done, help the civilians evacuate!”

Looking around, Margaretta realized Vandre was right. The Schnee elites were needed at the gates, or the fighting would spill into the entire city.

Obviously, it pained Margaretta greatly to leave her beloved master to fight two apostles alone, but she believed in him. Ever since they were little, Vandre Schnee had always been charging forward, and never once had he encountered an obstacle he couldn’t overcome.

“Good luck!” she shouted as she led Uruluk and the other wyverns away. Vandre gave her a thumbs-up in response.

One of the apostles raised a hand toward the retreating group.

“So, how many of you have Miledi and the others demolished so far?” Vandre asked in a mocking tone, stopping the apostle’s hand. Its empty eyes turned to Vandre, seemingly aghast.

“I bet the fight’ll get a lot more fun if you let us reach her, you know?” he added with a grin.

“That’s enough from you,” the apostle said, firing a barrage of feathers at Vandre.

“Kuou, retreat! If you get a chance, meet up with Badd and the others to help them out!” Vandre shouted. In response, the wolves that had been fighting on the various rooftops, terraces, and open-air

corridors of the castle howled in assent. More than half of the divine wolves had been slain, so it was easy enough for Kuou's pack to dodge any stray feathers and head for the temple.

Batlam protected Vandre while he barked out orders, and once he was done, he was able to turn his full attention onto the apostles.

It was time to go all out. There was no need to hold back any longer. Here and now, he was going to prove that Vandre Schnee had what it takes to kill one of Ehit's strongest warriors as well.

"Die, Vandre Schnee."

While Batlam protected Vandre from attacks from above, the second apostle dropped below him and fired another disintegration beam at his back. Vandre barely had time to glance back before the blast hit him square in the back. However—

"You die."

"Ah!"

Luckily, the wings sprouting from his back were more than enough to protect him from the apostle's attack. The moonsilver scales coating the wings glinted in the sunlight. And a second later, Vandre transformed.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

With a mighty roar, he dissipated the disintegration beam.

"That form..." one of the apostles muttered, retreating a dozen or so meters to not get caught up in the roar's shock waves. The apostle raining down attacks from above stopped momentarily as well.

Batlam stopped acting as an umbrella shield for Vandre and instead wrapped himself around Vandre's chest like a breastplate, for Vandre's transformation this time wasn't the same as his usual ones.

"Is that your dragon form?" one of the apostles asked, a hint of surprise entering her voice.

Like with his normal transformations, gleaming moonsilver scales covered Vandre's entire body. He also had his sharp claws, tail, and powerful jaw. However, he was nowhere near his normal size. While he had grown a little, he was still the size of a relatively large human at two meters tall. Moreover, he still stood on two legs and was shaped roughly like a human rather than a dragon.

This was the final form of his dragon transformation, the humanoid dragon form. In this form, he could take full advantage of both his draconic resilience and strength, as well as his martial arts skills that he could only use as a human. After discovering that the true nature of his metamorphosis magic allowed him to manipulate organic matter, Vandre had settled on this as his final form.

The most shocking thing of all, however, was how everything from his scales to his wings had metallized. Vandre had physically fused with the defensive artifact Oscar had made specifically for him.

As he was now, Vandre was made of the hardest substance in the world, hence why he could take disintegration beams without worry.

“Let me tell you something.”

One of the scales on his chest glowed, and he pulled two greatswords out of thin air. They were similar in design to the apostles’, except for the fact that they were jet-black. Both were, of course, Oscar’s make.

Vandre swung them to either side, imitating the way the apostles swung theirs before starting a fight.

“Miledi isn’t the only ruler of the skies!”

There was a boom followed by a shattering noise as Vandre created a magic platform and leaped off it with such force that it broke. By the time the apostles had realized what had happened, Vandre’s sword was swinging up at the apostle above him.

The apostle cartwheeled out of the way and summoned her own two blades. She swung horizontally at Vandre with one of them, wreathing her blade with disintegration magic.

Fortunately, Vandre’s own blade was made of azantium and enchanted with magic-absorbing effects, so he could block without worry.

At first, it looked like the two were evenly matched in strength as Vandre met the apostle’s blade with his own.

But then, Vandre deftly parried the apostle’s blade away, ducked under her second sword, and thrust at her with his own second blade. The apostle backed away in time to dodge the thrust, but then Vandre grabbed her leg with his tail and drew her back in while opening his jaws wide.

“Ah!”

The apostle crossed her swords in front of her to try to block the breath attack he unleashed. However, because Vandre had her by the leg, the breath didn’t blow her backward, and the apostle took the full impact of the breath. She desperately fired off disintegration attacks to keep the breath from freezing her, but they did almost no damage to Vandre’s scales, and she failed to break free.

The second apostle launched her own disintegration attack while closing in on him, but Batlam just opened his chain gate and absorbed it.

“I’ve seen that trick already,” the apostle said calmly.

“So what?” Vandre replied, unperturbed.

The disintegration attack had been a feint; the apostle suddenly accelerated to triple her speed, then swung diagonally down at Vandre. He crossed his own blades above to block, and before the apostle could follow with another attack, he beat her back with his wings.

“Ngh... Those are swords too?!”

Indeed, the scales on Vandre’s wings were all mini enchanted blades. They had the effects of Oscar’s old magic sword series, and also had the ability to cut through mana.

Despite how tough an apostle’s body was, she came away from the exchange covered with cuts all over her body.

“This is nothing!” the two apostles shouted in unison, burning a ton of their mana to raise their stats.

The first apostle, who was almost completely frozen by Vandre’s breath, cut off her own leg to escape and used brute strength to unfreeze herself. She then created a magic circle with her feathers and launched the strongest lightning spell there was at Vandre.

Meanwhile, the second apostle flew up and unleashed a scattershot barrage of disintegration blasts.

“Now it’s getting interesting,” Vandre muttered to himself, dropping his altitude to dodge the barrage. Beating his wings, he manipulated the icy wind he had created to bolster his own speed.

The two apostles chased after him, pinning him from either side.

The trio flew around the Divine Mountain, clashing over and over. Vandre weathered the assault as best he could, trusting in his natural armor and using his entire body as both a sword and shield. He even managed to get a few counter hits in.

However, as the minutes passed, the apostles began to notice something.

“He’s using our sword techniques...”

“Did he learn them during the fight?”

The apostles had thought it strange that he’d copied their mannerisms when summoning his weapons, and that his weapons were almost identical to theirs. But until now, they hadn’t realized the true meaning behind Vandre’s choice.

“The best way to learn a martial art is to practice it in combat.”

Of course, facing two apostles at once was no easy task. Though Vandre himself was still unhurt, his scales and Batlam had taken quite a beating.

For the briefest of seconds, the apostles paused their attacks in shock, and Vandre took that moment to catch his breath. At the same time, he attached the handles of his two swords together.

“Your swordsmanship never evolves, so you won’t even be able to touch me now,” Vandre said with a sneer, prompting the two apostles to charge at him.

Vandre twirled his new weapon, batting aside the swords of both apostles. This was the next level of their fighting style he’d come up with after analyzing the apostles.

He twirled his dual-bladed staff-sword in one hand, making

footholds for himself with ice magic and darting this way and that all the while. He made full use of his wings and his now free bare hand to attack while defending with his staff-sword. Sometimes he even called forth other weapons to wield in his off-hand.

His combat style was a pure work of art. The two apostles had no way of getting past his guard, much less defeating him. In fact, they were the ones getting pushed back now.

As the cold realization that they might actually lose began to set in, a newcomer arrived on the battlefield, sealing their fate.

“Sorry I’m late,” Naiz said, teleporting in behind the apostles so smoothly that the space around him didn’t even warp.

The first of the apostles instinctively wrapped her wings around herself, which turned out to be the right call because Naiz’s Void Fissure hit her a second later. The impact knocked her out for a brief second, and when she came to, she realized she was falling. She tried to beat her wings, but realized they weren’t there.

That was far stronger than expected.

The apostle quickly created another set of wings and reoriented herself, but she could tell she’d taken some serious internal damage.

Meanwhile, the second apostle had lost her arm to Vand्रे’s slashes while she’d been protecting herself from Naiz’s second Void Fissure.

“Hmm, looks like it works now,” Naiz said, admiring his handiwork.

“It’s a shame you can’t kill them instantly with it,” Vand्रे said with a sigh.

“Miledi’s first attack only worked because Oscar held them in pace and they didn’t know what was coming. Now that they’re on their guard, it won’t be nearly as easy.”

“Yeah, but...”

“Mhm. With Lyu’s evolution magic, it’ll be a different story. I’m a little miffed that I wasn’t able to take them out in one attack myself.”

“Sounds like you need to train harder.”

The two apostles glared at Naiz and Vand्रे as they bantered with each other. The second apostle then flew over to where the first was. The two had finally completed their spell. A giant silver sun appeared above Naiz and Vand्रे.

“Now then, the hostages are safe and Badd has things under control in the castle. Let’s meet up with Miledi,” Naiz stated, unconcerned by the spell looming over him.

“Yeah, let’s put an end to this,” Vand्रे replied, and the two stood back to back. A flicker of worry went through the apostles’ minds, but they remained confident in their spell.

“A pawn that won’t dance as desired must be eliminated,” the two

apostles said in unison, sending their spell of utter annihilation down on Vandre and Naiz. It was as huge as a blast from Lac Elain, but it barely went a few meters before it was stopped by an invisible wall. However, that wall didn't *feel* like it was offering any resistance. The spell felt like it wasn't being impeded, and there was nothing it was touching, but it still didn't advance any further.

Confused, the apostles glanced around, attempting to glean the cause.

"A barrier? Perhaps a spatial one?" one of them said. She did indeed spot a spatial barrier around the sphere of silver light, but a spell like theirs, which was made up of a composite of different magic types should have been able to break through such a barrier.

"Wait, it's not reaching the barrier?"

Indeed, the apostles' spell could have easily destroyed Naiz's barrier if it touched it. However, it wasn't.

Making a snap decision, the apostles charged at Vandre and Naiz, their swords held out in front of them like lances. If their spell wasn't working, they'd have to attack the barrier themselves.

But they, too, were stopped just before it. It didn't feel like they had hit a barrier, nor did it feel like anything had actually absorbed the impact of their charge. No, it felt more like they were still moving, but in reality, they weren't. No matter how hard they tried, they couldn't reach the barrier.

"Impossible..."

For the first time, the apostles were so shocked that it showed visibly on their faces. They had finally realized what was going on.

This was Naiz's domain-creating spell, Infinite Corridor. The true nature of spatial magic was that it manipulated boundaries. Upon understanding that, Naiz had come up with a spell to expand space indefinitely.

Right now, Naiz was endlessly expanding the distance between the apostles, their spell, and his barrier. Fast as the apostles were, they couldn't cross the thousand kilometers between them and the barrier instantly. And the longer they took, the more open they left themselves.

"Hm? Ngh! What's this?"

Dark tendrils started spreading through the apostles' porcelain-white skin. It was as if their veins had come up to the surface, but they looked a much darker red than blood. Something was invading their bodies.

No, not something, someone, one of them realized.

"A monster."

"That's right. How does it feel to be on the receiving end of your own inhuman experiments?"

Vandre had taken the same race-fusing experiments that Rasul had been forced to perform while being possessed by one of Ehit's friends and tried seeing what would happen if he did the same to an apostle. This was one of Vandre's new spells, Invasive Ruin. Both of Vandre's swords were coated in a mixture of Vandre and Batlam's fluids, and any wound he caused with the swords would cause those fluids to start invading the opponent's body. The fluids themselves were a living, thinking chimera that could act on its own.

Of course, on autopilot, the chimera wasn't strong enough to invade an apostle's body, but if Vandre had time to concentrate and use metamorphosis magic to strengthen it, then that was a different story altogether.

"I was hoping to beat them in a sword fight just to prove I'm better, but oh well," Vandre said with a shrug. "Destroy them, my familiar."

He snapped his fingers, and the two apostles' chests exploded.

"How—?"

"We're un—!"

With their cores destroyed, the apostles' wings vanished and their bodies began to crumble into nothing.

As they faded away, Naiz and Vandre said, "You lost because you can't grow."

"You lost because you didn't put in any effort."

Both of those were things only mortal species, who struggled and fought for what they had, could understand.



A few seconds later, the two of them heard a massive thud from the ground below. Looking down, they saw an absurdly huge metal pillar standing at the city's southern gate. At the same time, the two apostles Laus had been fighting vanished.

"Hey, Naiz. We've gotta step up our game. That crazy guy just beat two apostles by himself," Vandre said in awe. Though, a little bit of frustration at his own inability to do the same leaked into his voice as well.

"I-I mean, he had evolution magic helping him out, so..." Naiz replied, his voice trembling.

A few minutes ago, at the capital's central plaza, the priests and the city's citizens alike were reeling from the shock of seeing Lac Elain slam right into the palace. They were also literally reeling from the physical shock wave the impact had caused.

The knights had stopped in their tracks, and even Kimaris looked over his shoulder in disbelief.

The leaders of the various nations began to doubt the sanity of the Liberators. But then, they watched as three apostles descended and Miledi slaughtered them in an instant. If they'd been stunned before, after that, they were utterly nonplussed. Kimaris and the other priests especially took a lot of mental damage.

While most of the captured heretics scurried to safety, three remained behind to watch the spectacle.

"I bet my idiot son came up with that ridiculous kamikaze attack plan."

"Miledi's sure turned into a terror since I last saw her. I know she said she'd beat up god for our sake, but I didn't think she'd actually do it..."

"Those two are definitely the Liberators' biggest problem children. But man, am I glad to see them stick it to the church like that! Give 'em hell, you two!"

Even though Karg, Baharl, and Rigan were as badly wounded as the other captured Liberators, they'd stuck around to watch. Snapping back to his senses, Kimaris turned to glare at them.

"Get going already!" Laus shouted, rubbing his temples in exasperation.

Shrugging, they offered Kimaris one last grin, then jumped through the portal. And with that, the rescue operation was officially complete. The Liberators cheered, while Kimaris's eyelids twitched in barely concealed rage. But of course, the surprises weren't over yet.

Kimaris didn't even have a chance to express his rage before the next stage of the Liberators' blitzkrieg tactics began.

“Lyu!” Laus shouted, glancing over his shoulder.

“Mmm! It’s ready! I can go at any time!” Lyutillis exclaimed, her eyes sparkling as her best friend poked its feelers out from behind her shoulder. She’d actually had her cockroach friends all infiltrate the city ahead of time to spread the seeds of her new ability for her.

“Do it!” Laus shouted, prompting Lyutillis to wave her Guardian Rod.

“Domain control—Forest Manifestor!”

A wave of green covered the battlefield. Roots erupted from the flagstones, trees grew out of buildings at an impossibly fast pace, and branches spread to form natural lattices over the city streets. The newly formed forest spread out for five hundred meters in all directions, creating a circle within the plaza around the execution platform. The trees grew to be far larger than the nearby buildings, going up as high as a hundred meters.

Kimaris watched as the trees created a natural barrier surrounding the plaza. This was almost as unbelievable to him as a giant airborne submarine crashing into the theocracy’s palace. And because he was so preoccupied with watching, he didn’t notice that he and his priests had been cut off from the people who’d come to watch the execution...nor did he notice that Laus was coming for him.

“My Lord Archbishop!” one of his priests shouted.

“Ngh!”

Laus leaped toward Kimaris with blistering speed.

The archbishop realized his mistake too late, but another figure stepped in to defend him. There was a resounding crash of metal against metal as Laus’s mace crashed against the newcomer’s shield. Laus then realized he recognized the person who’d stopped him.

“You’re that Paladin, Ajeen, aren’t you?”

Laus didn’t know where Ajeen had come from, but it didn’t matter. Even if Ajeen tried to stab Laus with his divine spear while Kimaris readied a spell using his sacred staff, he couldn’t lose his cool. Because right now, Laus’s priority was making sure he took the fight somewhere without innocent civilians.

“Time to go,” he said simply.

“Ah!”

The space around Laus began to twist like a whirlpool, dragging Ajeen and Kimaris toward him. This was one of Oscar’s forced teleportation artifacts, Summoning Circle. It created a three-meter wide gate that sucked everyone nearby into it, teleporting the user to a specified location within a few kilometers. It looked like a small, transparent glass bead, and could only be used once, but it was still quite powerful. Kimaris and Ajeen didn’t even notice when Laus smashed it to complete the teleport, let alone have the wherewithal to

stop him.

As he vanished, Laus threw several Summoning Circles into the massed crowd of knights in the plaza, grabbing close to eighty percent of them as well. They'd all bunched up, which had made things a whole lot easier for him.

"All right, everyone, let's get to work!" Rasul shouted, purposely drawing attention to himself.

"To the walls! Don't let the Templar Knights get close!"

Of course, that was just his way of announcing to the knights where the true battlefield would be.

"Don't you dare hurt any civilians! I, Demon Lord Rasul, shall not allow anyone to fight within the city streets!" he exclaimed, raising his voice to make sure the panicking civilians heard him.

"We aren't here to conquer! I swear on the name of the Haltina Republic that we have come only to defeat the wicked church who stands in the way of a peaceful future! Proud beastmen warriors, be sure to only point your claws at our enemy!" Lyutillis proclaimed right after, announcing her own intentions to the populace.

It was clear that both of them were speaking more for the benefit of the people than their own allies. Though the speeches also caused the five hundred or so remaining knights and the few remaining priests to return to their senses. They couldn't allow these inferior races to keep spouting their nonsense, after all. And they especially couldn't allow Lyutillis and Rasul's words to resonate with their citizens.

However, instead of focusing on them, both Lyutillis and Rasul turned their backs to the remaining knights.

Rasul took his army with him to the eastern gate, while Sim led the republic's beastmen to the west gate. Finally, Lyutillis took her group of liberators to the south gate. They flew off immediately, not even sparing a glance at the remaining knights or priests.

The knights had been gearing themselves up for a fight after those speeches, so they were flabbergasted by the sudden development. Left behind in a plaza bereft of everyone but civilians and foreign dignitaries, the knights burned with shame and humiliation.

Hearing the sounds of battle in the distance, one of the priests shouted, "A-After theeeeeeem!"

He was the highest-ranking priest left behind, so the knights hurriedly obeyed, running after the retreating Liberators, demons, and beastmen.

As they left, the leaders of the various nations exchanged glances, then all took in deep breaths. They sat down where they were, content to watch how this revolution played out from the sidelines.

At the eastern gate, ten thousand Templar Knights were facing off

against a combination of armored familiars and autonomous golems that numbered around three thousand. Because of how pressed for time the Liberators had been, Oscar and Vandred hadn't been able to make enough soldiers to outnumber the knights, but they'd at least made sure the familiars and golems were strong enough to handle apostleified knights. Moreover, because they'd been teleported into the middle of the knights' formation, the golems and familiars were doing a good job of wreaking havoc among the ranks. The knights had lost a good twenty percent of their forces, while only ten percent of the golems and familiars were down.

While the ratios were somewhat close, in absolute terms, it meant thousands of knights had died at the hands of just a few hundred constructs and familiars. Part of that was because the knights were still shaken by seeing their barrier destroyed and having a battleship rammed into their palace.

Habeel, the vice-captain of the Templar Knights' second division, had been given command at this gate, but the speed of events had left her unable to give out satisfactory orders.

"Strass-sama...probably won't be able to help, will he?"

She knew that her beloved captain had been assigned to the palace to guard the pope. Of course, if he did show up, she would have gladly handed command over, since she was just the acting commander.

Acting commander or not though, she had no excuse for not leading the men while no one else was around. Until Strass showed up, she needed to preserve as much of her forces as possible.

"No, that's not right! We need to achieve victory here so we can rush to his aid immediately!"

The enemy was already in the palace. If anything, they needed reinforcements more than Habeel did. Habeel realized confusion was still clouding her thoughts, and she smacked her forehead with the handle of her sword. That helped sort out her thoughts, and she quickly started barking orders to her men.

"Battalion commander, you're in charge of holding the gates! I'm leaving five thousand men in your care!"

"Huh? Oh, yes, ma'am! Understood!"

After a brief moment of confusion, the battalion commander saluted. With that, the other officers started regaining their senses as well... Meanwhile, Habeel spread her wings and rose into the sky.

The quality of the individual members of the Templar Knights varied a lot. All of the Holy Templar Knights had mastered the art of flight immediately, but only sixty percent of the regular Templar Knights could fly, while only forty percent of them could do so while fighting. Indeed, even Habeel wasn't great at it. She simply hadn't had

enough time to practice.

Desperately trying to control her wings, Habeel rose into the sky and rained feathers of light down on the battlefield. The screams from below told her she'd hit many of her own knights, but it had been a necessary sacrifice. Finally able to look up and away from the battle, she shouted, "We fly to the palace's aid! I need three thousand men who know how to fly to come with me!"

Thus far, the knights had just been trying to kill the foe in front of them, but having concrete orders breathed new life into them, boosting their morale. Shaking off the fear that had seeped into them after Miledi's explosive entrance, they spread their wings and took to the sky.

A few more than three thousand flew up, but a few of Vandre's familiars could fly and many of Oscar's golems fired barrages of enchanted daggers at the rising knights, so ultimately, a little less than three thousand actually joined Habeel. Still, once they were above the walls, which were a good fifty meters tall, they had an easier time dodging the attacks from below and shaking off the few fliers who could pursue.

What kind of madman uses such valuable magic swords as artillery? Habeel thought to herself in disbelief. Of course, she didn't know Oscar was the kind of man who could mass-produce them. Not only that, but all of the golems had Treasure Troves to draw an endless supply from. Plus, Oscar's swords had been upgraded with spirit magic to hone in on enemies, making them an utter nightmare to deal with. And of course, he'd decked out all of Vandre's familiars with mass-produced artifacts as well. Oscar's crafting abilities truly knew no bounds.

As far as Habeel was concerned, however, the creator of these golems was a scoundrel of the highest order. But while she wasted time cursing out Oscar in her head, another fifty knights dropped thanks to his creations.

"Martyrdom for the cause is the greatest honor a knight can earn! Forward, men!"

Rousing her men, Habeel flew straight toward the palace. However, as they approached the walls, a voice rang out.

"If you wish to pass, you'll have to kill me first!"

There was a loud boom, and a bloodred blade shot out from above the ramparts. Habeel barely had enough time to dodge, and there was not nearly enough to tell her men to follow suit. A score of her knights tumbled to the ground, blood spurting from lethal wounds.

"Rasul-sama, please don't jinx yourself like that!"

"Oh, sorry, Lestina. It was just one of those lines I wanted to try saying at least once."

“Your Majesty, please don’t let your guard down.”

A group of people was standing atop the walls. They all had dark skin and pointed ears.

“Demons!”

“That we are. We fight with the Liberators, and are here to pass divine...err, actually, I guess demonic judgment on the church. Oh, we’re not here to kill all humans or anything, though. Our only foe is you, the church. That’s important, so you better not mix it up.”

It sounded more like Rasul was talking to himself than to Habeel. Habeel didn’t care either way, however, since she had bigger things to worry about.

“Such power...and that blood-colored mana...”

She felt overwhelmed just looking at the double helix spiral of mana radiating from Rasul.

It can’t be...

“I am the Demon Lord, Rasul Alva Igdol. Until the Liberators’ revolution is over, I’m afraid I cannot let you pass.”

He looked quite imposing, standing there atop the city walls. It almost felt like the Demon Lord was the true ruler of the theocracy, which, of course, was all part of the plan.

Step one was to ensure the safety of the citizens. Since almost all of them were gathered in the plaza, the easiest thing to do was to simply leave. Step two was eliminating the enemies already in the plaza. By moving Kimaris and the majority of the knights out of the city, the remaining troops belonging to the church would have no choice but to follow. Step three was reversing who was attacking and who was defending. The demons and the beastmen would use the capital’s walls against its own knights, preventing the armies stationed there to guard the gates from reentering the city.

Normally, the majority of a nation’s forces wouldn’t have been stationed outside the city, but everyone had believed the capital’s barrier would hold, and that the bulk of the fighting would happen on the plains outside. Of course, they hadn’t blindly believed the barrier would hold forever. Against seven ancient magic users, they had expected it to break eventually, but the plan had been to wear down the Liberators’ forces as much as possible while their ancient magic users focused on the barrier. No one had expected the barrier to go down in a single attack, and for the Liberators to just pass the Templar Knights by as they charged toward the palace.

Spotting the barrier protecting the plaza, Habeel realized she’d been played from the very start. Gritting her teeth, she shouted, “How dare you track your demon filth into our holy capital. Pay for your sins with death, Demon Lord!”

She could atone for her own shameful mistakes later, defeating

the enemy before her came first.

“This is a perfect chance to defeat the Demon Lord! Kill him at all costs!”

Mana surged from the apostleified knights as they readied to do as their vice-captain commanded.

Rasul flourished his sword in an overly dramatic motion and said, “I shall protect the people of this city!”

He was driving home the fact that their positions had been reversed. None of the knights pointed out that he’d been the one to invade the city first, or that he really had no grounds to be claiming to be a hero. Not because they didn’t want to, but because they were too angry to speak.

Elga, who was standing next to him, gave Rasul an exasperated look and said, “Your Majesty...you really don’t need to go that far.”

Unable to bear the taunting, the knights charged with Habeel at their head.

“Death to all heretiiiiiiiiics!”

They weren’t even thinking straight anymore.

“All right, shoot them down,” Rasul replied casually, and the two thousand five hundred demons he’d brought with him began their assault.

A wall of magical shock waves bore down on Habeel and her knights. Naturally, these shock waves were enhanced with mana-cutting capabilities, as well as evolution magic-endowed artifacts.

“Ngh, it can cut right through my holy armor?!”

Not even apostleification and divine relics could save the knights from an assault of this magnitude. The knights were utterly overwhelmed by the multicolor rainbow of magical shock wave attacks. For the first time, they realized why demons had been the race to unify the southern continent, despite having a much smaller population than humans. They were unable to advance even a single inch against this barrage.

“Mwa ha ha ha, slaughtering the church’s knights is so much fun!” Lestina shouted as she fired flaming spear after flaming spear into the knights.

“Please try to word things more diplomatically, General Lestina,” Elga said, firing off his own lightning barrage all the while. Each of their attacks was sure to kill at least one knight, sometimes more, yet somehow, Rasul was doing even better.

“You monsters! Do you wish to turn the capital into a bloody battlefield that badly?! Have you no shame?! Well, I, Demon Lord Rasul, shall not let you lay a hand on the populace!”

“Your Majesty, please rein it in a little. This is getting excessive.”

“Hm, you really think so? Why not join me, Elga? It’s pretty fun.”

“I made the right decision, coming to look after you.”

“Hey, what is that supposed to mean?!”

Even though he was joking around, with every swing of his bloodred demon blade, Rasul launched a shock wave that was sure to kill at least a few knights. It almost looked like they were being sucked into it to get their heads chopped off. Rasul’s magic shock waves were more like guillotines than anything else.

Habeel tore at her hair as she realized she wouldn’t be able to break through their defenses. Of course, she had never stood a chance. She was up against the demon empire’s strongest elites, warriors whose abilities were on par with the Holy Templar Knights. Even apostleified, regular Templar Knights simply couldn’t hope to complete. And it was precisely because they were hopelessly outmatched that Ehit had sent reinforcements to balance the scales.

“I command you in the name of Eddy Marker—stop moving.”

“Oh?” Rasul mumbled as he stiffened up for a second. Part of the wall underneath him bulged out, and a warhammer shot up from the protuberance, aiming straight at Rasul’s head.

“Your Majesty!” Elga shouted, coming to his lord’s defense just in time. He blocked the hammer with his halberd, but the force of the blow was so great that the parts of the wall he was using to brace himself cracked. Looking down, he saw a giant arm that had seemingly fused with the castle walls holding the hammer. The hammer itself also appeared to be made out of stone.

“Uwooooooooooooooh!”

With a defiant battle cry, Elga pushed back the warhammer, using his specialty, body strengthening magic, to buff himself. Looking down, Lestina saw a Paladin looking up at them from the roof of one of the buildings hugging the wall. Long black hair covered her eyes, giving her a gloomy air, and she was holding a staff aloft.

“You!” Lestina shouted, drawing her dual blades. However, that turned out to be a mistake.

“Don’t move!”

This knight possessed the special magic Divine Edict. It was a subset of spirit magic that interfered with the target’s consciousness, forcing them to obey the caster’s orders.

“What?!”

Lestina had been planning on launching herself off the side of the walls, but with her movements temporarily impaired, she found herself losing her balance and almost falling instead. A blast of disintegration magic headed straight at her, but a pair of strong arms grabbed her by the waist and pulled her back to the wall. Looking up, Lestina saw Rasul readying a score of shadow spears to launch at Eddy.

“Remember what Elga said, Lestina. Don’t let your guard down.”

“O-Okay...” Lestina mumbled, blushing when she realized she was resting in Rasul’s arms.

“This isn’t the time for lectures, Your Majesty. We’ve got a tough opponent on our hands here.”

As Rasul put Lestina down, he realized Elga wasn’t referring to Eddy, but the other enemy who’d appeared. Looking down, he saw that the ground around the castle walls was wriggling and jutting out in unnatural ways.

After a few seconds, a thirty-meter tall golem burst from the earth. Its body was metallic and seemed to be made of transmuted ore.

This was the special magic Divine Giant. The golem was actually a massive suit of armor that covered the knight who’d cast that magic, Paladin Outar. He hefted his massive warhammer, planning on smashing right through the city walls. Though they had been designed to defend the capital, they were now preventing his fellow knights from fulfilling their duty.

“How convenient that I got to be the one to face this enemy,” Rasul said with a smile as the Treasure Trove on his pinky began to glow.

What happened next came as a complete surprise to not just the knights, but even to Rasul’s own soldiers. A huge armored golem the same size as Paladin Outar’s Divine Giant—Oscar’s Shadow Emperor—appeared behind the golem and suplexed him. The resulting shock wave from Paladin Outar’s hundred-ton body hitting the ground buffeted enemies and allies alike. Habeel and her knights were knocked out of the air, while a few of the demon soldiers stumbled over the walls and had to find handholds to desperately cling to.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha! What do you guys think of my moves?! Amazing, right?! I wish I could show this to Oscar Orcus! I bet he can’t control his Shadow Emperor this well! I’m still the best actual user of artifacts!”

In a way, it was fitting for the Demon Lord to be cackling while a giant dust cloud rose into the air and everyone else struggled to recover from the physical and mental shock of what had just happened. Mind control or not, it seemed Rasul had been rather peeved when Miledi had claimed that Oscar the artifact maker was better than Rasul the artifact user.

“Hmm, borrowing this from him was the right call, it seems,” Elga mused.

“Indeed, your wisdom knows no bounds, Rasul-sama!” Lestina added, showering him with praise.

The Liberators had known about the golemifying Paladin thanks to the information they’d gleaned from the train attack, and Rasul had

correctly surmised that if that Paladin was going to show up again during the decisive battle, it'd have to be outside the city gates where he'd have enough resources to craft his golem armor. That was why Oscar had decided to loan his Shadow Emperor out to one of the teams handling the gates.

Rasul had volunteered immediately to be the one to hold on to it, claiming, "I know how to use that thing better than anyone else. I did see it slice through my own castle walls firsthand, after all."

Oscar hadn't taken kindly to the implication that Rasul could use his artifacts better than him, but he had conceded that Rasul would be able to handle it better than the other teams at the gates. Had Outar shown up at the southern or western gates, Rasul would have had to head over there, but luckily he had come right to him. Just then, Rasul saw two flashes of silver light, one above the palace and another above the southern gate. It seemed the apostles had descended.

Unfortunately, watching the advent of the apostles left him momentarily distracted.

"Sacred spear...grant me your strength—Divine Wrath - Overcharge!"

A white flash streaked down the main street, hitting the eastern gate from the inside. Though the capital's gates were built from the sturdiest materials known to man and enchanted to deflect magic, they were completely blown apart by the attack, which was wreathed in a layer of disintegration magic.

Turning, Rasul saw Paladin Ajeen standing at the far end of the main street. It seemed he'd come from the southern gate to reinforce the numbers here.

"Now's our chance! Hit them from above and below at the same time!" Habeel shouted, determined to get the invaders off her walls.

Though Oscar's Shadow Knights and Vandre's familiars tried to hold the knights back, now that they had recovered from their initial shock, they couldn't be stopped, especially since they didn't fear death and rushed at the familiars and golems in coordinated groups, holding them off just long enough for some of their allies to slip through. As a result, a full thousand knights were able to slip through the gates.

"Ajeen-dono! Please blast a hole into that tree in the central plaza as well! We can use the citizens as hostages to slow the enemy down!"

Habeel had absolutely no compunctions about sacrificing her own people. She firmly believed there was no greater purpose than slaying heretics, and that those who lacked the power to fight should consider it an honor to give their lives for the cause.

"It's just as we feared," Rasul said as he manipulated the Shadow Emperor to throw his massive tower shield over to the main gate, blocking any more knights from passing through.

“Lestina, stop those knights! Protect the civilians! Elga, you take care of that Paladin!”

“As you command!” the two of them said in unison, Lestina taking her squad to chase after the knights while Elga jumped down to solo Ajeen.

“Steel yourselves, my brave companions! The decisive battle is upon us. Hold nothing back. Fight with everything you’ve got! Show these church fanatics the pride of the demon race! Today, we make history!”

Deafening cheers answered Rasul’s speech.

At the same time, Outar sucked in the dust cloud around him and rose to his feet. Pure white mana rose off of him like steam. What’s more, Habel, Eddy, and the Templar Knights started radiating white mana as well.

In response, Rasul brandished his blade and declared, “It’s time for a bloodbath—Ignis!”

His own bloodred mana flared up, eclipsing the mana of all the knights combined.

At the western gate, another fierce battle was unfolding. However, at least half of the battle was taking place within the walls, on the western main street. After all, the gate had already been breached.

“Tch, you bastards!” Valf, who was holding down the western main street against the knights, shouted.

An old couple could be seen cowering by the window in the building behind him. The knights in front of him kept firing Celestial Flashes at him, heedless of the civilians behind him. In fact, they were doing it precisely because they knew Valf wouldn’t dodge. They smirked as they bombarded him with magic.

Valf crossed his arms in front of him and his Metal Batlam deployed over his leather armor to absorb the blows, but that alone wouldn’t be enough.

“Uwooooooooooh!”

Thus, he activated his special magic, Float Field, right as the Celestial Flashes were about to hit him to redirect them upward into the building’s roof. Float Field let him manipulate gravity in a small area around him for a brief period, which gave him just enough time to divert the Celestial Flashes. However, he wasn’t able to get them all, and the few that hit him sent him careening through the window and into the building.

“E-Eek! G-Get out, you filthy beast!”

“Please save us, Templar Knights!”

The husband threw a vase at Valf, while the wife pleaded with the knights to help.

“Don’t you get it? Those knights are the ones trying to kill you!” Valf exclaimed as he kicked away the ruins of the window frame, blocked the vase, and stalked over to the couple.

“Wh-What are you going to do to us?”

“Protect you, obviously!”

Valf scooped the couple up into his arms, ignoring their shock, and ran to the corner of the room. A second later, a white flash shot through where the couple had been standing.

The wife gaped at the knight who’d attacked her, but the husband seemed to understand what was going on.

“I-If...my life can be of use to an honored knight, then I have no regrets,” he said in a trembling voice, praying to Ehit that his martyrdom would be swift.

Shaking his head, Valf whipped out a Summoning Circle out of his pouch and said, “Don’t be so eager to die, old man. You should live a long life together with your wife.”

The couple blinked in confusion, then actually looked at Valf properly for the first time. He was around their son’s age, and while he looked a little imposing with his brow furrowed, he didn’t actually appear all that scary. At the very least, he wasn’t anything like the bloodthirsty monsters the church said all beastmen were. In fact, he didn’t even look all that different from a human, aside from his wolf ears and tail. The wife opened her mouth to say something, but before she could, Valf teleported the two of them away.

“Stay put in the central plaza for now. You’ll be safe there. Sorry for getting you mixed up in our fight.”

That was the last thing the couple heard before they found themselves standing in the crowded plaza. For a while, the two of them said nothing. They’d seen a knight, one of the respected pillars of the church, try to kill them. Meanwhile, it had been a beastman soldier, who’d saved them with an apologetic look on his face. Things would have been so much simpler if they could’ve simply pretended the past few minutes hadn’t happened.

Looking around, the couple saw many other people warping into the plaza as well. Some of them looked furious, others terrified, but most simply seemed confused, just like the old couple.

As for Valf...well he was in a bit of a pinch.

“Gah!”

A scattershot of rubble assailed him. He’d escaped the old couple’s house just before it had been crushed, but then the rubble had seemingly come to life of its own volition and chased him down.

“Commander!”

“We’re here to help!”

Two bearman warriors jumped between Valf and the storm of

rubble, blocking it with their Onyx Shields. Using the time they'd bought him, Valf reoriented himself and, while coughing up blood, charged at the knight flinging rubble at him.

"I'm tired of your shitty magic!"

"Too bad, 'cause I'm not gonna fight you up close," the vice-commander of the Templar Knights' fourth division, Bittle, said, his eyes glinting from behind his helm. He then waved his arms like a conductor, and the rubble maneuvered around the bear-men to hunt down Valf once more.

Bittle's special magic was Telekinesis. He could wrap his mana around anything he could see and control it remotely. It couldn't be used directly on living creatures with their own mana pools, but it was still a powerful ability. Doubly powerful now that he'd been apostleified, of course. In fact, he was partly the reason the western gate had fallen so quickly, since he'd been able to remotely unlock the gates and throw them open. However, that alone wouldn't have been enough to overwhelm the defenders. There was one other reason the gate had been overrun so quickly...

"God provides us mortals respite...and his absolute might grants us tranquility."

Paladin Diese. He was blind and had been spouting sermons ever since he'd arrived at the battlefield. Everywhere he went, the beastmen warriors in the vicinity started trembling and their teeth started chattering.

Diese's special magic was Doomsday Sermon. When he activated it, everyone around him was struck by a crippling terror. They didn't see hallucinations or anything, they were simply assailed by an inexplicable fear. And even with the debuff reversal that Adel had activated, this fear couldn't be nullified. It was because this fear had slowed the beastmen down that the knights had been able to break through so easily.

"Don't falter, men! This battle will decide the future of this world! Fight with everything you've got!" Sim shouted, trying to bolster his warriors' morale. At the same time, he stomped the ground, activating his special magic Shock Wall to try to knock Diese away.

Had his attack landed, Diese would have been sent flying. But of course, if he could get his attacks to land, the knights wouldn't have made it this far in the first place.

"Only in Ehit's bosom are we safe."

Diese struck his staff against the ground and a white dome-shaped barrier appeared around him. The barrier was made of disintegration magic, so Sim's shock waves couldn't break through it.

It must take a lot of mana to activate that barrier, or he'd keep it permanently active, but...

Incidentally, Diese's blindness arose from the fact that he had no eyes at all. His eye sockets were empty. And yet, it seemed like he could see attacks coming anyway. Sim kept hitting him with shock wave attacks to try to slow him down, as well as burn through his mana, but it was taking time.

Meanwhile, the knights had already advanced a good hundred meters into the city. Nirke's aerial division was thankfully making sure the knights didn't just fly over everyone, but Sim was still forced to split his troops more than he'd like to cover all of the side streets and alleyways. As a result, the unit guarding the main street was continually getting pushed back. It was only a matter of time before they were overwhelmed.

This is supposed to be a short, decisive battle, but if we can't even hold out for the short amount of time it takes for our leaders to win, then we're doomed.

Beastmen were by no means weak, but the majority of them unfortunately lacked the ability to use magic. Their superior physical strength was their main asset, and they could only take full advantage of it when fighting in the dense forest. When fighting on a battlefield where the opponent could freely use magic, they were at a clear disadvantage.

Sim understood that intellectually, but he'd never felt it as keenly as he felt it now. His soldiers had a plethora of powerful artifacts to protect them and to provide them with enough offensive power to duel even apostleified knights, but it simply wasn't enough.

"Waaaaaaaah, do we really have to fight without Her Majesty's magic to help?" Sui wailed, her voice seemingly coming from everywhere and nowhere all at once. She managed to throw her voice like that using pure skill too.

"You're just gonna have to deal with it! Badd and the others need her help way more than we do!"

Lyutillis needed her Forest Manifestor's fog and greenery to cast evolution magic on others over a long distance. Naturally, she'd sent her fog over to Badd and the others first, as they were the ones who were fighting the Holy Templar Knights.

But of course, Sui didn't care about who needed the help more, since she just wanted her life to be easier.

"Haaah, Her Majesty's so freaking useless!"

"Hey, don't insult our queen!"

"Please, she'd probably love being insulted. Honestly, any respect I had for her vanished the moment I learned about her fetishes."

"Th-That may be true but— Oh, screw it!"

Sim stomped angrily on the ground, pulverizing the Templar Knights advancing toward his position. While it was true that his

beloved queen had some rather problematic inclinations, Sim was still loyal to her. That aside, it was solely thanks to Sui that the beastmen hadn't collapsed completely already. She'd already slain hundreds of knights by herself. Her skills as an assassin were coming in handy on this battlefield.

Outside of the Pale Forest, her unique talents made her the strongest beastman. Her accomplishments were so overwhelming that it was hard for Sim to complain when she badmouthed the queen. Unfortunately, soon enough, Sui was faced with a crisis so pressing she didn't even have time to insult her queen.

"How terrifying. Everything I see is so very terrifying," Diese said in a sad voice. In fact, that was why he'd gouged out his own eyes. Though, that had only made his hearing better.

"What terrible sounds. Such evil must face Ehit's divine punishment."

No matter how hard he tried to drown out the noise with his sermons, Diese couldn't help but hear his enemies' heartbeats.

"Doomsday Sermon!"

Fear the end of the world...and through your fear, prevent the end.

Diese focused his magic, targeting Sui and Sui alone with it.

"Uwaaa..." Sui roared as she appeared in the middle of the battlefield, swaying unsteadily. Her eyes were unfocused, and she seemed to be shrinking away from something.

"Get that rabbitgirl!" Bittle ordered.

"Shit! Everyone, protect Sui!" Sim shouted in a panic.

The knights all rushed toward Sui, determined to take this opportunity to eliminate the greatest threat to their lives. The beastmen hurriedly ran over to Sui to defend her, but then another Paladin swooped down onto the battlefield.

A barrage of white feathers and a few well-aimed Celestial Flashes scattered the beastmen. Shrieking in fear, Sui instinctively threw herself to the side, narrowly avoiding a sword swing to the neck. It still grazed her though, drawing blood.

Turning around, as she rolled, Sui saw the same female knight she'd fought during Laus's rescue. Fira, the user of the special magic Stigmata, which made all wounds she inflicted never heal. Like everyone else, Sui was protected by a Metal Batlam, but Fira had managed to weave through its defenses. Had Sui not dodged, she would have been decapitated.

Sui's fear turned to despair as she realized how hopeless her situation was. After all, Sim and Valf wouldn't be able to get to her in time. Meanwhile, Fira's started to glow brighter and brighter as she charged a powerful disintegration attack.

Rattled as she was by Diese's magic, Sui couldn't help but think

this was the end for her. She crouched down, cradling her head, feeling more afraid than she ever had in her life.

“Make sure not to hit our allies! Fire!”

Just then, a barrage of magical missiles and breath attacks rained down on Fira. She deflected them with her sword, retreating to a safe distance. Another burning hot breath attack targeted Diese, who was forced to put up his barrier and thus cancel his Doomsday Sermon.

“Thanks for the assist!” Sim shouted, looking up to see Margaretta leading a flock of wyverns. The mere sight of her was enough to make the beastmen’s morale explode. They let out a resounding cheer that shattered the nearby windows.

Meanwhile, Fira decided to take Sui down even if it cost her life as she charged into the magical barrage. But just before she reached Sui, she instinctively came to a halt.

“Sui, are you okay?!” Sim shouted, running over as well. “Take a second to—”

“Ke he he...”

Strange laughter interrupted him, and the fur on his ears stood on end. Sui slowly, surely rose to her feet, and all the knights in the vicinity stopped moving as well.

“Everything scary deserves to die,” she said in a flat voice, her neck tilting at an impossible angle. She was grinning, but the smile didn’t reach her eyes. In fact, she looked a little like a psychopath. Then, with another ominous laugh, she vanished from sight. This wasn’t her usual stealth that took a few seconds to activate either, since she disappeared instantly.

“B-Behind you!” Diese shouted, sounding panicked for the first time. Fira instinctively slashed at the air behind her, but unfortunately, Diese had warned the wrong target.

“Vice-captain Bittle!”

“Huh?!”

Bittle felt a heavy weight on his back and Valf, who he’d been fighting, stared at him in shock. Suddenly, Bittle felt a searing pain on both sides of his neck.

“Give me your head,” Sui said, and suddenly, Bittle’s world flipped upside-down. He only realized what had happened a second later, when he saw that he was looking down at his body. It was missing a head, and there was a blood-smeared rabbitgirl with knives in both hands standing behind it.

Sui kicked Bittle’s corpse away, then advanced on Fira without even bothering to hide. Fira charged at her head-on, and this time Sui was able to block the swing with her Metal Batlam. Then, before Fira could jump away, Sui spit some green liquid at her.

“Gaaah, is that acid?! You little—”

“Come, let’s melt together. Ke ke ke ke ke ke ke ke ke!”

Half of Fira’s face sloughed off. An acid that corrosive should have harmed Sui as well, but for whatever reason, she looked perfectly fine as she pushed Fira down, cackling.

Fira launched a feather barrage that bloodied Sui pretty badly, but she ignored the damage and took a bottle out of her Treasure Trove, catching it in her mouth. Then, she bit down on it and kissed Fira on the lips.

“Mmmpfh?!”

Sui had poured more of the acid down Fira’s throat, and white smoke poured out of both of their mouths.

It was a truly grotesque, terrifying sight. As Sui looked up from Fira, who had fallen unconscious and was frothing at the mouth, everyone, foes and allies alike, involuntarily started backing away. But Sui wasn’t done yet.

“All scary things must die!” she cackled again, looking even more deranged because parts of her face were also damaged by the acid.

“You’re the scariest thing here!” everyone shouted simultaneously. It seemed Diese’s fear-inducing magic had been so effective that it had driven Sui off the deep end.

Regardless, thanks to Margaretta’s timely assistance and Sui’s sudden power-up(?), the western forces were able to rally once more.

A different battle raged on in the skies above the palace.

“Three ships are attempting to slip past our port side! They’re heading for the central plaza!”

“Hah, just as we expected! Shoot them down!”

Lac Elain was currently embroiled in a fierce struggle for aerial supremacy with the theocracy’s airships.

Salus barked out commands from his seat on the bridge, which his crew hurried to obey. Powerful magical cannons then fired from both sides of Lac Elain.

Six ships had been trying to get around the flying submarine, three on each side, but the cannons hit them all in the stern, shooting them down. It looked like they would crash into the buildings down below, but just before they did, the magic contained within the cannon shells activated, slowing the airships’ descent. They were being buoyed by the same barrier that held Lac Elain aloft.

“Mikaela!” Salus shouted.

“On it!” she replied, her eyes shut tight with concentration. She was sitting on a hastily built chair that was set next to Salus’s, panting heavily, with sweat pouring down her forehead. She was using her Soul Sight to make sure there were no civilians in the vicinity of where the airships had crash-landed.

"Tim! Sector 4, block 5!" Mikaela shouted.

"Roger!" he replied.

Tim Rocket was currently waiting on standby in the ship's bottom hatch. The hatch was open, giving him a bird's-eye view of the capital. And as soon as he heard Mikaela, he sent out his Isoniol Eagle, which was enhanced by his special magic, Animal Harmony. It had a communicator ring attached to its leg, allowing Tim to communicate with it over long distances. The eagle also had Summoning Circles held in its beak, which it dropped on a family fleeing from where one of the airships was falling, transporting them to the central plaza.

Together, Mikaela and Tim were in charge of evacuating any citizens that might get caught in the cross fire.

"Commander, they seem to have changed objectives!"

At first, the airships had tried to head to the Divine Mountain, or to the city walls to aid the knights fighting there, but now they were focusing on taking Lac Elain down and trying to make their way to the central plaza.

"They must want to destroy the dome and let the citizens loose into the city..." Salus muttered.

Either that or just take them hostage outright.

So long as it was done in the name of Ehit, the church was able to justify all sorts of heinous acts.

"It really does feel like we're the defenders and they're the invaders, doesn't it?" Salus mumbled as he shook his head, returning his attention to the task at hand.

"Turn her around! We're heading to the central plaza ourselves!"

"B-But, Commander, if we do that, the plaza will become a battlefield!"

"We're too outnumbered to stay here! It's only a matter of time before some of those airships manage to slip past us! And once they start firing on that plant barrier, it's over! We need to get there first with Lac Elain and deploy our barrier as far as it'll go!"

If the church started firing on the tree, the citizens would scatter, which would be the biggest blow to the Liberators as they'd have to dedicate a lot of manpower to protecting a scattered populace. The crew shivered as they imagined the knights firing on their own people.

As Lac Elain hurried to the plaza, the airships following it started aiming at the big tree. It seemed they'd realized what Salus's plan was, and were hoping to shoot the tree down before he could get the barrier up.

"Send out the Black Barrier! Turn us sideways to use the hull as a shield as well!"

The barrier split off from the main body of the ship and deployed itself around the tree as Lac Elain turned sideways to cover as much of

the dome as possible.

A second later, a hundred airships fired their cannons at Lac Elain.

“Brace for impact!” Salus shouted, prompting everyone to grab onto something as Lac Elain shook violently. Though, a few people weren’t able to grab onto anything and were thrown into the wall or the floor.

Plumes of smoke rose from the ship’s starboard side, which had taken the hits, and the hull creaked ominously. Half of the mana stored in the ship had been used up, and about forty percent of the weapons and outer armor were severely damaged. Against all odds, though, Lac Elain was taking on the entirety of the theocracy’s fleet by itself.

“We’re still kicking! Deploy the barrier! Protect the central plaza!” Salus shouted, ignoring the blood trickling down his forehead. The crew sprang into action in response, and the glowing barrier surrounding Lac Elain morphed into a pillar shape and expanded to cover the entire plaza.

“Holy shit, you look like a mess. Captain, you okay?”

Three men ran onto the bridge, looking worried. Shirley, who’d been manning one of the guns until now, got to her feet upon hearing the man’s voice.

“Dad!”

“Shirley...why are you here?”

“Are you kidding me?! *That’s* the first thing you have to say to me?! You idiot!”

She’d obviously come because she was worried about Rigan. The rest of the crew gave him an exasperated look. The other two who’d come in with Rigan were Karg and Baharl. All of the prisoners who’d been rescued at the plaza had been teleported into Lac Elain.

The Liberators had chosen Lac Elain in case the church had found some way to track where the Dark Gates teleported people. And while Oscar had managed to increase their range significantly, it was still possible the church would be able to send pursuers after the escaped prisoners. In that sense, Lac Elain was the safest place to send everyone. Moreover, Oscar had built a new medbay for everyone so their wounds had been at least somewhat healed.

Rigan ran a hand through his tousled hair and replied, “Sorry. But as you can see, I’m right as rain. Thanks for coming, Shirley.”

“No problem.”

There was more they wanted to say to each other, but there was still a battle going on. Thus, Shirley wiped away her tears and returned to her post.

“So, what’s the situation?” Baharl asked, leaning against the back of the captain’s chair. It seemed standing was still an ordeal for him.

However, his pride as Andika's boss wouldn't allow him to lie down while there was a battle going on.

"We're slowly getting pushed back," Salus said calmly.

"Sounds pretty bad."

"We knew the odds were stacked against us from the start. All we have to do is hold out until our leader's blitzkrieg attack is done."

Salus ordered his crew to start firing back at the airships, looking completely unfazed by how bad the situation was. Just then, another huge impact rocked the ship. Baharl almost toppled over, but Karg and Rigan supported him.

"Ngh, what was that?! What happened?!"

"Damage to the ship's stern! No, wait...part of the stern has been completely obliterated! There's an apostle attacking us!"

"So there were still a few left, eh?"

Salus didn't think he'd been too optimistic with his estimations, but they'd already slain three apostles, and he'd been hoping the third would be the last of them. Knowing there were more made him want to throw his chair across the bridge.

However, the situation just kept getting worse. Going pale, Karg and Rigan said, "Hang on, isn't that another one over there?"

"And there's another in the palace..."

The bridge's walls, floor, and ceiling were all transparent, so people on it could survey the surroundings. And everyone saw that apostles had appeared above the palace...and in the sky above the southern gate.

"Four of them...? Gah, concentrate your fire on the apostle! We have to defend this barrier with our lives!"

There were two apostles above the palace, one to the south, and one that was attacking the ship's rear. Had Oscar not significantly upgraded Lac Elain's defenses, the ship would have been full of holes already.

"Karg-dono, please repair as much of the ship as you can! Rigan, Baharl-dono, help evacuate the injured from the damaged sectors!"

While Oscar's defenses dampened a lot of attacks, some still managed to pierce the hull. And of course, every time that happened, some of the crew got injured.

Rigan and the others nodded, but before they could head off—"Captain!"

The apostle circled around to the front of the bridge. Her beautiful, emotionless eyes looked straight at Salus. She then pointed her sword at him, silver light gathering at its tip.

I ain't going down that easily!

The transparent walls started to darken as a Metal Batlam began covering them. Salus deployed numerous spatial barriers in front of

the bridge as well, just as the apostle's disintegration attack hit it. The shields held, in part because Oscar had been extremely meticulous about defending it as much as possible. Furthermore, thanks to Oscar's Skynets, Salus and his crew could still see what was going on outside even with Metal Batlam covering the bridge.

Metal Batlam was quickly eroded away by the disintegration attack, and a huge amount of Lac Elain's mana reserves were used up in regenerating the spatial barriers to keep the beam at bay.

"We've lost sixty percent of our defensive mana stockpile, as well as sixty percent of Metal Batlam's volume!"

"We can only keep the barriers active for another twenty seconds!"

"In that case, use fifteen seconds to charge the main frontal cannon! We'll blast that apostle out of the air!"

Just as Salus said that, the apostle was indeed blown out of the air. Everyone on the bridge stared in shock, as they had yet to fire the cannon. But then Laus showed up, and everything became clear.

"Laus-dono!" Salus shouted, overjoyed. It seemed Laus had sent the apostle flying with his mace.

Baharl, on the other hand, simply grew more confused.

"Hang on! If you're here, then who's fighting over there?!" he shouted, pointing to the south. Indeed, it appeared that the figure fighting the apostle to the south was *also* Laus.

As Metal Batlam receded into the ship, Laus Two turned to the apostle that was flying back to them and swung his mace again.

"Did it just extend?!" Karg exclaimed as he watched the mace stretch.

"And now it's bending?!" Rigan shouted, wide-eyed, as the mace bent like a whip and coiled around the apostle.

With a dismissive flick of his wrist, Laus Two threw the second apostle over to the south, giving the Liberators on the bridge a thumbs-up with his free hand. He then kicked off against the air and hurtled south after the apostle. The apostle righted herself midair and tried to counter with a barrage from her wings, but Laus Two simply batted the feathers aside and continued raining blows down on her.

Enjoying the reactions of Karg, Rigan, and Baharl, Salus leaned back into his chair and said, "Phew, looks like we survived."

He returned to dealing with the airships still firing on them, while Mikaela discovered a group of knights heading to the tree, so he dispatched a unit to take care of them as well.

After a few minutes, Baharl and the others finally recovered from their shock and turned to go complete their tasks.

"Do you think Oscar and the others are okay?" Karg asked, a worried frown on his face.

Unfortunately, communication with the group at the summit had been cut off, so there was no way to know how they were faring.

Salus smiled gently and replied, "I don't know, but all we can do is believe in them."

"Yeah, you're right."

Baharl and Rigan smiled as well. Then, the trio left the bridge.

At the southern gate, the Templar Knights had long since recovered from the golems and familiars' surprise attack, for it was Lilith Arkind who commanded the unit at the southern gate.

While all of the other captain-class knights had left their second-in-command in charge of the gates so they could be part of the palace procession, Lilith Arkind had begged to be assigned to the front lines, and her decision had paid off.

However, just as she began directing her men to surround and eliminate the golems and familiars, Archbishop Kimaris and Paladin Ajeen appeared in the middle of the battlefield, dueling Laus.

While she was shaken by Laus's sudden appearance, she had been raring for a chance to fight him. Thus, she directed her men to support Ajeen's offense as Laus focused on Kimaris.

Unfortunately for her, Laus's strength was far greater than she'd remembered. Plus, before she could reorganize her battle lines, the knights who'd been posted at the central plaza teleported in as well, and Lyutillis joined the fray along with her royal guard and a select group of Liberators.

While there were far more knights than there were beastmen, the arrival of Lyutillis meant the knights were the ones at a disadvantage. She immediately deployed her mist and cast evolution magic on her allies.

Because the Guardian Rod was a piece of Uralt, Lyutillis could use it to deploy the forest's mist anywhere. While the mist wasn't thick enough to fully obscure the knights' vision, it was limited enough that their formation ended up in shambles.

The remaining golems and familiars were buffed a significant amount with Lyutillis's arrival as well, and they mounted a devastating counterattack. As things stood now, Lilith couldn't even get close to Laus.

"Out of my way, small fry!" she shouted impatiently, sparks flying off her body.

"Sorry, but I'm afraid you'll have to deal with me if you want to go any further, Commander—no, Lilith Arkind!" Reinheit said resolutely, standing in her way.

Lilith needed to return to her troops to take command and assist them. And more importantly, she needed to reach Laus so she could

slay him personally. And yet, she couldn't seem to shake off Reinheit Ashe, a knight who by all accounts was as mediocre as they came.

"Traitor! How could the Holy Sword choose you to be the hero! I can't believe it!" she roared, converting her rage into electricity and using superparamagnetism to accelerate her movements and circle behind Reinheit in a flash.

However, Reinheit blocked her lightning-fast sword slash without even turning around. He'd easily parried all of her attacks so far. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get past his ironclad defenses. It was like she was fighting a wall. And to make matters worse, she was losing in the magic department as well.

"Celestial Flash!"

"Celestial Flash!"

Their two spells collided, but after only a few seconds, Reinheit's pushed straight through Lilith's.

Is this the difference between a replica and the original?! Lilith thought, grinding her teeth in frustration. She couldn't believe her replica Holy Sword was so much weaker. Though, what really scared her was Reinheit's impeccable swordsmanship. It was hard to imagine he'd been an average knight just a few months ago. They'd been fighting for only five minutes, yet Reinheit had already started analyzing Lilith's swordsmanship.

Is this the strength of a hero? Is this the power of someone chosen by the Holy Sword? Why was he, the traitor, chosen instead of one of Ehit's loyal soldiers?! Lilith couldn't help but agonize over that fact.

"I have to slay Laus Barn with my own two hands!"

"Sorry, but Laus-sama is currently disciplining his children. I won't let any outsiders interfere with his family matters."

Kaime and Selm had flown over just a few minutes ago as well. They were currently fighting Laus a short distance away. Even from here, it was obvious they were trying to kill him, but Laus was so much stronger than them that it didn't feel at all like a death match.

It really did look more like an argument between a father and his sons. Of course, that only served to make Lilith even angrier. Her thoughts and feelings were a complete mess. All she knew for sure was that she wanted to make Laus suffer. Then, she wanted to make him beg for forgiveness and—

"Fine, no more holding back," she mumbled. Her voice was calm, but there was fury in her eyes.

"Thunderclap - Finale."

Lightning enveloped Lilith, and the roaring thunder drowned out all other noises. She'd transformed into an avatar of electricity. This was the ultimate technique she'd devised after her apostleification. She looked as intimidating as a real apostle in this form, but Reinheit

forced his trembling legs to stir awake and summoned up all the courage he could muster.

“Holy Sword, grant me strength—Limit Break - Overload!”

If Lilith had brought out her trump card, it made sense for him to use his own. Responding to the will of its wielder, the Holy Sword began to glow so brightly that it seemed as if it was made of pure light.

“Out of my way, Hero!” Lilith shouted, charging toward him all the while.

“You’ll never get past me! I swore to protect Laus-sama, so I will!”

Light and electricity collided, signaling the start of a battle that would go down in history.

Meanwhile, Lyutillis had parked herself in front of the southern gate. She’d deployed a barrier to keep anyone from entering the city, but after summoning the fog and using her evolution magic, she’d started concentrating on something and hadn’t budged an inch.

“Kill the queen at all costs! If we can’t get rid of the fog or her evolution magic, we won’t stand a chance!” Kimaris shouted, hiding behind a knot of knights all holding up tower shields to defend him. For added defense, all of the knights had also coated their shields with disintegration barriers.

He was so wary because he understood better than anyone just how dangerous the man guarding Lyutillis was. In the past, he’d been the church’s strongest knight, but now he was its strongest foe.

Kimaris had managed to dispel the fog in a small area around him with his staff, and there were a thousand five hundred knights with him. The rest were busy dealing with the golems and familiars. The one good thing about this situation was that he had Ajeen with him, as well as the two people who would probably be the most effective deterrent to Laus, Kaime and Selm.

“Diiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiie, Laus Barn!” Kaime shouted, a look of pure hatred on his face as he charged.

“We’ll get you this time!” Selm exclaimed as he unleashed a disintegration barrage at his father.

They’d grown significantly stronger since the battle at the stream on the outskirts of Entris. However, it wasn’t nearly enough.

“Calm down,” Laus said simply. He then blew away Selm’s disintegration blast with a single swing of his mace, while catching Kaime’s sword with his prosthetic arm. After that, he simply flung Kaime back with a flick of his wrist.

“I’m here to talk with my kids. Don’t interfere.”

“Nnnnnngh!”

Ajeen had tried to stab Laus with his spear, but he swatted it away

easily with his mace. He then blasted Ajeen with Soul Shock. Had he not been apostleified, he would have been knocked unconscious, and as it was, the attack still staggered him.

Another unit tried to swoop down on Lyutillis from the air, but he shot them all down with a hundred Celestial Flashes.

“Overwhelm him with numbers! Maneuver around him! The only other enemies you have to deal with are a pack of mongrel beastmen!” Kimaris shouted, and his knights tried to flank Lyutillis from both sides as a result. They knew most of them would die in the assault, but they didn’t mind, since they would be martyring themselves for their god.

The problem was, Laus wasn’t the only guard Lyutillis had, so even if a few of them managed to get past him, that wasn’t enough.

“It’s time to show your worth as royal guards! Don’t let them lay even a finger on Her Highness!” Craid shouted, and the five hundred guards he’d brought with him roared defiance at the church’s knights.

“Compared to the Holy Templar Knights, these guys are chumps! Don’t go chickening out on me now, guys!”

“All right, my pretty knights. March into my waiting arms!”

“Fuck, just when I thought I was free of Snowbell, it turns out there are more of these weirdos. Why must I be cursed like this?”

Leonard and the founder of the sect of cross-dressing burly men, Jinglebell, were here as well, with a hundred Liberators in tow. As was Kipson, the former Andikan outlaw who’d been forced to become Snowbell’s disciple. He’d come with another thirty of Andika’s best fighters as well.

Leonard’s powerful Heartbreak Shot was enough to stop any knight in their tracks, while Kipson and his Andikan friends had mastered the art of running away thanks to their terrifying experiences with Snowbell’s hugs, so they were able to run circles around the knights.

Jinglebell had absolutely no affinity for magic despite being a demon, but they had trained themselves to the point where they could destroy anything and everything that got in their way with their muscles. Their punches were as hard as steel, and the lascivious way in which they stared at the knights struck fear into their hearts.

“What the hell is this monster?!”

“Run! Who knows what’ll happen if he gets a hold of you!”

Even the knights willing to martyr themselves were afraid of what was in store for them if Jinglebell grabbed hold of them. Considering Jinglebell was just wearing bikini armor and a coat, they were probably right to be scared. Though it wasn’t any of the knights who’d issued that warning, it was Kipson. He’d been so traumatized by Snowbell that it was a conditioned reflex to warn everyone. The other

Andikans looked similarly terrified.

“Excuse me? Do you want a hug as well?” Jinglebell asked with a playful wink, licking their lips.

“No thank you! We’re sorry, ma’am!” Kipson and the others replied in unison, then started attacking the knights with such vigor that it was as if they’d all cast Limit Break.

However, Kipson and his men soon found themselves hard-pressed. There were simply too many knights. Thankfully, no new ones seemed to be making it into the arena that Kimaris had created, but even then, there were too many for them to handle on their own.

“Devote every last scrap of your lives to Ehit! Fight with everything you have until your dying breath!” Kimaris shouted, and his knights responded. And not just in spirit either.

Kimaris’s special magic was Death March. Whoever he cast it on was able to continue fighting until their body had quite literally been torn to shreds.

So long as Kimaris’s magic was active, actually killing a knight was nigh-impossible. They could keep going even after they lost limbs, were stabbed through the heart, or even had their heads bashed in. In fact, some of them kept going even when their heads were cut off.

I expected this to happen, but still... Laus thought as he kept Kaime and Selm at bay. He was, of course, fully aware of what Kimaris’s special magic was. He’d told the Liberators as well, so they had been prepared to fight a horde of undying zombies, but the problem was Kimaris’s magic was able to affect so many more people than before. It was for that very reason that Laus and Lyutillis had chosen this gate as their battlefield after rescuing the hostages.

“Don’t think you can just ignore me!” Kaime shouted, trying to split Laus’s head open with a disintegration slash right as he dodged a shield bash from Ajeen. And at the same time, Selm cast Binding Chains of Light to try and keep Laus in place.

To Kaime’s utter surprise, his sword slash did indeed cleave Laus in two.

“What the—?!” Kaime uttered as he staggered backward in surprise, with Selm and Ajeen looking shocked as well.

“I wanted to save as much of my mana as I could, but I suppose I’ll have to go all out.”

“We need to slay Kimaris as fast as possible, after all.”

As Laus was cut in two, he morphed into two identical Lauses with the same voice, appearance, and equipment.

This was the spirit magic Shadow Soul. It allowed Laus to make mana-based clones of himself that shared his base soul, making each clone as powerful as his main body. It was the new ability Laus had unlocked upon coming to understand the true nature of spirit magic,

which was that it affected the immaterial qualities of living creatures.

The second Laus turned away from Kaime and charged at Kimaris's guards, Ajeen chased after him, determining that it would be more dangerous to lose Kimaris here than Kaime.

Laus didn't bother to stop him, since he figured his clone would be able to handle things by himself and turned back to face his sons.

"Kaime, Selm."

"D-Don't say my name!"

"You're just a filthy traitor!"

Seeing their faces filled with hate made Laus's chest tighten up in pain. And yet, he didn't avert his gaze. He was the one who'd sent them both to the church when they were still young, after all. They were like this because he'd been too cowardly to fight against Ehit's will.

"I'm sorry," he said simply, and Kaime and Selm sucked in deep breaths.

"I'm sorry I was a failure of a father. I'm sorry I couldn't protect you. I'm sorry I abandoned you."

"Who cares about any of that?! You should be apologizing for betraying Ehit!"

"You don't get it at all, do you? Do you really think we want you to be a father to us now?"

Kaime and Selm glowered at Laus, then launched another series of attacks at him. He blocked them all with ease, frowning.

"True. I don't deserve to call myself your father after all that's happened. However..."

Laus caught Kaime's blade on his mace, and Kaime faltered momentarily when he saw the determination in his father's eyes.

"I didn't betray Ehit," he said.

"What?"

"It's Ehit who betrayed humanity. He sees people as nothing more than pawns on a chessboard to be moved around as he pleases."

"That can't possibly be true! He loves those who worship him. Besides, even if that is true, if that's what he wants, then we should accept his will."

"That way of thinking is misguided, my children."

Kaime and Selm clicked their tongues and leaped backward. They then deployed their wings and hit Laus with a feather barrage from both sides.

Gritting his teeth, Laus twirled his mace to knock down the feathers. He wasn't getting through to them. He knew overturning years of persistent brainwashing wouldn't be easy, but that was no reason to give up.

"I want you two to live."

Even if they disavowed him, Laus wanted his sons to have a future.

“You two would give your lives for Ehit if he asked you to, right?”

“Obviously. What better way to show our faith?”

“Martyrdom is an honor.”

“Well, I don’t want you to die.”

Kaime and Selm blinked in surprise. They thought Laus would have tried to convince them through some more complicated logic than just that. In fact, they began to wonder if this Laus clone was even the real Laus.

Annoyed, they fired disintegration beams at him.

“It’s not just Ehit who’s the problem. I don’t want you dying for anyone else’s sake, no matter who they are.”

“Yeah, well, we don’t need your permission to do anything!”

Kaime fired off a giant Celestial Flash as Laus dodged the disintegration beam. Laus knocked it back with a mana shock wave from his mace, then turned to Selm, who was trying to charge a powerful spell. Using his mace’s unique ability to stretch and bend at will, he knocked Selm back without even having to close in.

“I want you guys to understand... Kaime, Selm! Understand what it means to live for yourselves!”

“Wh-What kind of nonsense are you—?”

“People weren’t born to serve god! They were born to seek happiness!”

“Serving Ehit is our happiness!”

Never before had Laus looked so desperate. His earnestness seemed to be getting through to Kaime and Selm, and he could see a tendril of doubt worming its way through their hate and anger.

“If that’s what you truly wish to do of your own free will, I won’t say anything. But you didn’t choose this path, did you? You were forced to join the church. Faith was the only option available to you! Everyone should have the right to choose their future, but because of Ehit, our choices have been taken away from us!”

Free will. The ability to choose one’s course in life regardless of the circumstances of their birth. That was a right that all creatures should have had.

“Kaime, Selm. Is there anything in your life that you’ve truly been able to choose for yourselves?”

The two of them stopped moving, as if bound by invisible chains. They looked as though they’d finally realized something.

“Shut up! Shut up! How dare you say that?!”

“I’m tired of hearing your stupid lectures!”

They once again bared their weapons at Laus, but now they looked more like kids throwing a tantrum than warriors trying to kill

him.

There was still more Laus wanted to say to his sons, years' worth of things he'd failed to tell them when he should have. But before he could, a beam of silver light came shooting down at his clone.

Kaime and Selm reflexively looked to see what was going on and saw that Kimaris's defensive formation had crumbled and Ajeen had been sent flying. His shield was in pieces, and one of his arms was hanging limply by his side as he staggered to his feet.

That silver beam of light had stopped Laus's clone just before he'd crushed Kimaris's head with his mace. And of course, that beam had been shot by an apostle.

Tears of gratitude streamed down Kimaris's face as he looked up at the apostle, and his knights' morale rose exponentially. The apostle then turned to Ajeen and said, "Aid the eastern gate."

He saluted and ran off at once. Meanwhile, tiny particles of white light suddenly appeared all over the battlefield.

"Kimaris-sama, we've successfully dispersed the mist!" one of the bishops shouted.

"Well done!"

Indeed, the mist was beginning to vanish wherever the particles showed up. While Kimaris and the knights had been fighting, the bishops had been spreading disintegration particles everywhere to attack the mist. And with the mist gone, Kimaris was able to expand the range of his special magic. All of the knights that had been defeated by the golems and familiars awkwardly rose to their feet like zombies.

"Shit..." Leonard muttered, cold sweat pouring down his back.

"It's not over yet, Leonard. Have faith," Craid said resolutely. He was covered in blood, one of his arms was broken, and a third of his royal guard had been slain. But even so, he remained steadfast. No matter what, he would stand and protect his queen.

Leonard chuckled and raised his fists, bolstered by Craid's determination.

"That's right. We still have our trump cards left too!" Jinglebell said with a wink.

"Yeah, but if they don't come out soon, we're gonna get overwhelmed," Kipson replied, panting heavily.

"Fear not, for the wait is over," Lyutillis said in a clear voice that rang across the battlefield.

Leonard and the others grinned, watching as Lyutillis opened her eyes, her verdant green mana spiraling up to the heavens. Her burst of mana was so huge that the knights who'd been cheering the arrival of the apostle all fell silent.

She smiled in a way that Craid and the others had never seen

before as she started the incantation for Forest Manifestor. It was at once fearless, bewitching, and arrogant.

Lyutillis waved her Guardian Rod with an elegant flourish, and with an earth-shaking rumble, trees started to grow in front of the southern gate. However, unlike the trees that had sprouted up around the central plaza, these weren't just passive barriers. Their iron-like roots writhed like tentacles, and their branches scooped up their queen, taking her high above the city walls.

There were ten of these trees in total, and the moment Lyutillis closed her eyes, they started surging with mana.

"Enchanted Forest Manifestor," she declared, pointing her Guardian Rod toward the ground. A second later, pointed roots shot out of the ground underneath the knights, skewering them where they stood, thick branches lashed out like whips, and razor-sharp leaves cut through the knights' armor.

Oscar, Laus, and Vandre had worked together using creation, metamorphosis, and spirit magic to create a special variety of seed that Lyutillis had then grown into a new species of monster—Enchanted Trents—using the powers of her Guardian Rod.

While their physical abilities were impressive, their real strength was in the fact that their special magic was Mana Absorption. They could suck out mana from the ground and use it for themselves, or give it to Lyutillis. And with the mana they provided her, Lyutillis was also able to cast a regular Forest Manifestor all the way over at the palace five kilometers away.

"This changes nothing," the apostle said in an emotionless voice, heedless of her panicking allies. She began gathering silver light in her hand, assuming that regardless of how powerful Lyutillis's monsters were, they could still be disintegrated.

"Please, do you really think this is the full extent of what I spent all that time preparing?" Lyutillis said with an almost condescending grin. It seemed she still held a grudge toward the apostles for harming Uralt.

"I'm not skilled at direct combat."

But no one is better than me when it comes to supporting my comrades!

"Unlimited Overdrive," she said, directing her mana toward the Liberators fighting at the palace. Of course, she'd also prepared a surprise for her enemies.

"Core Seal!"

Ripples of green mana spread out from Lyutillis, swallowing up Kimaris and his knights.



“This is...” the apostle mumbled, furrowing her brow slightly. She could tell everyone fighting for the church had suddenly been weakened immensely.

The reason evolution magic could raise people’s stats was because its true nature was the ability to manipulate the fundamental information coded into living beings. For example, it could add one to someone with a power stat of one, making it two. And of course, it could also obviously do the reverse and reduce the power stat of something. However, reducing something was infinitely more difficult than increasing it, which was why it had taken Lyutillis time to analyze and overwrite the information of all the church’s knights. Even then, it was something that could only have been managed by someone with prodigious skill.

“Now then, I think everyone’s been brought back to the strength they were at before being apostleified,” Lyutillis said with a smile.

“It matters not. As soon as I kill you, everything will return to normal,” the apostle replied, firing off a disintegration beam.

“Sorry, but you’ll have to go through me first,” Laus said, moving in front of Lyutillis and holding out his prosthetic arm. Sky-blue mana swirled around it, and he flicked two metal fingers upward, creating a localized gravity field around his arm that redirected the beam up into the sky.

“Don’t get so cocky,” Laus said. “I can take as many of you on at once as I have to.”

The apostle turned and saw that one of Laus’s clones was beating down her compatriot who’d been attacking Lac Elain. She then turned back to Laus, who was making a “bring it on” gesture with his prosthetic arm.



“What’s wrong? Getting cold feet?”

The apostle narrowed her eyes, looking vaguely annoyed.

“I shall dismember you and present your limbs to my lord as a gift,” she said, and with a single flap of her wings, she charged toward Laus. He leaped off from his perch, meeting the apostle head-on.

“I can take care of the archbishop and his minions! You just focus on the apostles, Lau-chan-san!”

“If you call me that in front of Kaime or Selm, I’m going to kill you!”

Meanwhile, Laus’s main body was still keeping Kaime and Selm busy.

“Brother, the apostles are struggling! We have to at least keep his main body here or they’ll be overwhelmed!”

“Got it! I won’t hold anything back!”

Laus cast a sad gaze upon his two children. He’d known a brief conversation wouldn’t be enough to change their minds, but it still hurt.

Still, he believed that his words must have had at least a little impact, so he tightened his expression. No longer could he face Kaime and Selm as a father; he now had to fulfill his duty as a Liberator.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t talk for longer, but it looks like time’s up.”

His obsidian-black mana swirled around him with such force that Kaime and Selm staggered backward.

“I know I’m being selfish. You can hate me for this if you want.”

Laus could no longer bear to see his precious children in Ehit’s clutches, regardless of what they wanted.

“Limit Break, stage one.”

“Huh?”

Kaime and Selm blinked in surprise as Laus’s mana pulsed. Both of them had thought the only way Laus had been able to overpower them, crush a contingent of apostleified knights, and break Kimaris’s defensive formation all at once was because he’d already been using Limit Break. Of course, they knew evolution magic had been boosting him as well, but that alone shouldn’t have been enough, especially seeing as he was fighting on even ground with two apostles with just his clones. If he’d somehow been managing all of this without even using his Limit Break, then he truly was...

“A monster...”

“There was a reason I was hailed as the church’s strongest knight.”

Kaime and Selm had been hoping that if they just dragged the fight out, eventually, Laus would exhaust himself and leave himself vulnerable like he had during that fight in the valley.

“How can this be happening?!”

Selm looked up at Laus in terror, futilely firing a barrage of feathers at him. Kaime desperately raised his sword, but before he could even launch an attack, Laus struck.

“Soul Purge!”

Laus ran over to Kaime and Selm faster than the eye could see, put a hand on each of their foreheads, and knocked their souls out of them.

In their soul forms, Kaime and Selm watched their bodies slump to the ground.

“The Liberators will take care of you. We’ll talk again later.”

Laus made sure to gently place them both on the ground. They wanted to respond somehow, but they couldn’t find the right words, so they simply looked down at their own unconscious bodies.

“For now, just watch. I hope after we accomplish what we came to do, you’ll both...” Laus mumbled as he looked over his shoulder at his sons’ soul forms. “...you’ll both see that there’s so much more to the world than the church.”

As he watched Laus depart, Kaime unconsciously touched his forehead where Laus had placed his palm. As a pure soul, there shouldn’t have been any sensation, but for some reason, it felt warm.

Meanwhile, Selm watched as Kimaris desperately tried to keep reanimating corpses even after losing his apostleification, while the Liberators fighting him watched each other’s backs and kept their comrades safe.

Before long, it became too painful to keep watching Kimaris, and he and Kaime turned to look up at the sky. There really was nothing they could do except watch now.

“Has his Limit Break grown more powerful than before?” one of the apostles muttered.

The two of them were fighting two Laus clones, both of which had gotten the same power boost the main Laus had when he’d used Limit Break stage one.

Before, Laus had possessed eight stages of limit break, with the final stage multiplying his stats by five, but now his very first stage was as strong as the standard Limit Break spell, which tripled someone’s stats, and he had ten total stages, with the tenth multiplying his stats by ten.

“Limit Break, stage three.”

Quintupling his stats was as easy as going into stage three now, which didn’t even put that huge of a burden on him.

“To think he could reach Overload status with such ease.”

The third and final Laus rose up to join his clones, and the

apostles switched targets to him. One fired a barrage of feathers at him, while the other launched a disintegration beam.

Laus's clones blocked both attacks while he hefted his mace and went after the apostle who was firing feathers. His mace stretched outward at blistering speed, and the apostle had to raise her claymore to block it. However, the force with which it stretched was more than she'd initially anticipated, so she was sent flying.

Laus sent his two clones to finish her off, while he turned his attention to the one firing the disintegration beam. By the time she realized she was under attack, Laus was already right in front of her.

"Such unbelievable speed," she whispered.

"Don't talk, or you'll bite your tongue."

Laus swung his mace so fast it looked like a blur even to the apostle's enhanced eyesight. Fortunately, her claymores were large enough that she could block even if she couldn't tell its exact position, but the force of the blow numbed her hands.

"So evolution magic and spirit magic combined have made you this strong...? Ngh!"

"I told you you'd bite your tongue."

Laus's next blow landed right on the apostle's head, and shock waves radiated from the point of impact. However, the apostle didn't crash to the ground because Laus whirled his mace around and hit her chin from below before she moved more than a few centimeters.

The apostle's body was tougher than most things, but even she couldn't withstand successive concussive blows like that. Still, even as her vision blurred, she managed to launch a feather barrage at Laus.

"Hmph!"

However, Laus wasn't fazed. He simply swung his mace, converting the massive amount of mana within it into booming shock waves that ripped apart the feathers.

By the time the apostle's vision had finally cleared up, she realized Laus had rammed his prosthetic arm into her stomach. She doubled over as a combination of mana shock waves and the Void Fissure spell that Oscar had baked into the arm obliterated her innards. Plus, the punch was strong enough to tear apart her battle dress as well.

Eyes glinting with something akin to desperation, the apostle dropped her claymores and grabbed Laus's shoulders. She wrapped her wings around them both, determined to annihilate Laus with a disintegration suicide bomb.

"Hmph!"

However, Laus headbutted her so hard that she let go of him and stumbled backward. Then, not giving her even a second to recover, Laus followed up with a front kick that hit her right in the stomach, where her armor had already been shattered. As she sailed backward,

the apostle tried to recall her claymores, but Laus chased after her and shattered her wrists with his mace.

Like his arm, Laus's mace was enchanted with spatial magic. That, combined with his own superhuman strength allowed him to damage even the apostle's ridiculously sturdy body.

"You've surpassed all human limits."

"Oh? So even without a soul, you're capable of feeling emotion?"

Laus could see the impatience, and the fear, on the apostle's face now. He then smashed her face in with his mace.

The apostle's neck let out a sickening crack. She futilely lashed out with a kick, but Laus just grabbed her foot with his prosthetic arm and snapped that as well. Realizing she was in mortal peril, she tried to fly away.

"Not so fast."

Laus knew just how powerful an apostle could be. Given free reign of the skies, she'd be able to keep her distance and pepper Laus with ranged attacks, hence why he'd decided that once he closed the distance with one, he wouldn't let them escape no matter what.

"Uwooooooooooooooh!" Laus let out a roar that could be heard throughout the entire city as he launched a series of devastating blows on the apostle. He was attacking so fast that she didn't even have a chance to counterattack. There was no finesse to his techniques, nor was he adding any complex magic to his attacks. He was simply converting his soul into power and bludgeoning the apostle—the very symbol of Ehit's might—to death through brute force.

"Gak!"

"Die!"

Pretty much every bone in the apostle's body was broken at this point. Her limbs were all facing the wrong direction, and her spine was bent at a precarious angle.

There was another "Die!" in the distance, and one of Laus's clones threw the second apostle over. She was in as bad a state as the first. No, actually, she was even more damaged, since she'd had to deal with two Lauses at once. The apostle the main Laus had faced was still trying to get her wings out and fire off more feathers, but the second just let herself be flung around like a battered rag doll.

The two apostles crashed into each other midair, and as they hurtled to the ground, Laus flew directly above them.

"Limit Break, final stage!"

For just an instant, he activated his strongest Limit Break, then swung his mace down with all the might he could muster. He enlarged it as much as possible while swinging it, hitting both apostles with a literal metal boulder. The two of them were too weakened to deploy a disintegration barrier, and they were sent careening into the city's

main street.

“Hmm, I guess I only needed the third stage of limit break, really,” Laus mused as he looked at the mangled corpses of the apostles in the crater their collision had created.

He brought his mace back to regular size and recalled his clones. But he knew there was no time to rest, and he hurried back to where Lyutillis and the others were fighting. As he approached the battlefield, though, he saw that Kimaris and his bishops were all trapped within the enchanted trents’ roots, and most of them were dead.

He turned to Lyutillis, who puffed her chest out proudly. Laughing, he looked over the battlefield to see how everyone else was faring. The Templar Knights were still fighting, but they were sorely weakened and the Liberators had a clear advantage. Leonard and Craid would be able to take care of things easily.

However, as Laus turned back to Lyutillis, he heard someone call out to him.

“Why...? Why...?”

Looking over his shoulder, he saw Lilith staring up at him with a pained expression on her face. There was a deep gash in her chest, and she was clearly on the brink of death.

Reinheit was standing behind her, gritting his teeth. He was the clear victor, but he’d refrained from dealing the final blow, probably to let Lilith have this one last conversation.

She fell to her knees, but she kept her gaze fixed on Laus. There was no will to fight left in her.

Ignoring the battle raging around him, Laus went to Lilith and knelt in front of her.

“Why...? Why did you betray us...Laus-sama...?”

“Commander Lilith...”

Coughing up blood, Lilith stretched out a hand, as if searching for something. Her eyes couldn’t see anything anymore. Trembling, she shook her head and reached out further.

Laus tenderly grasped her hand and replied, “I’m sorry, Lilith, but I couldn’t bring myself to abandon what mattered most to me.”

The light disappeared from Lilith’s eyes, and the strength left her hand. Laus had no way of knowing if she’d heard his final words, or what she’d felt toward him in those very last moments. However, he couldn’t help but think that if he’d chosen to fight against fate sooner, she might have been one of those people Laus Barn would have considered too important to abandon.

With a twinge of regret, Laus gently closed Lilith’s eyes.

“You shouldn’t have been born into this country.”

Lilith was already dead, but for some reason, Laus felt that he

heard her say that. From any other knight, those words would have been an insult, but for some reason, Laus didn't think Lilith meant it as one.

"You're right, I shouldn't have been," he said with a small, sad smile on his face.

"Laus-sama," Reinheit said, walking over.

"Reinheit, you're in command now. Keep the citizens...and my sons safe until I return."

"Yes, sir!"

Reinheit put as much confidence into his voice as possible in order to reassure Laus that the capital would be safe in his absence.

"Lau-chan-san!"

"How many times do I have to tell you to stop—?! Ugh, whatever! Let's go, Lyu!"

Laus slung Lyutillis over his shoulder and leaped up into the air. Leonard, Craid, and the others all flashed him fearless smiles as he flew off to join Vandre and Naiz at the palace.

Eight thousand meters up, at the peak of the Divine Mountain, the sky around the Holy Cathedral was filled with numerous black spots. There was also a torrential downpour of enchanted swords striking it. That was the opening salvo Oscar and Miledi unloaded on Lucifer and his Paladins.

Most of the Paladins spread their white wings and flew out of the way of the barrage. However, Lucifer and four of his bodyguards, each of whom was carrying a sacred shield replica, stood their ground.

"Consecration!"

"Celestial Fortress!"

"Shield of Retribution!"

"Divine Protection!"

The Paladins deployed their respective special magics, one which created a spatial barrier, another which created a zone that dampened the impact of all attacks, yet another which reflected any attacks that hit, and a final one that simply buffed the defenses of everyone nearby, to protect the pope, while also relying on the natural sturdiness of their sacred shield replicas.

Oscar's rain of enchanted blades hit the roof of the cathedral a second later. And at the same time, disintegration beams headed toward Miledi and the others from four sides.

Miledi redirected them all using her gravity spheres, sending them toward the Paladins who were trying to fly up to them. However, those Paladins were much faster and more skilled fliers than the other knights. They easily dodged out of the way of the beams and fired off their own counterattack.

Large blades of light shot toward Miledi, accompanied by spears of light that were specialized for piercing over raw damage. There was also a deluge of light arrows and several shock wave attacks. Each of those spells was insanely powerful, a result of Lucifer's Divine Crusade buffing a group of already powerful apostleified Paladins. The combination was almost as strong as evolution magic.

"This might have actually been kinda tough if we didn't have your artifacts!" Miledi shouted, her sky-blue mana surging around her. Thanks to the evolution magic and debuff-repelling artifacts Oscar had made for everyone, Lucifer's Sanctified Purge wasn't wearing them down at all.

"Asura!"

Miledi knocked down the Paladins *and* their spells with one wide-area gravity field.

"Your Sanctified Purge doesn't seem to be doing much!" Meiru shouted as she circled around to cover Miledi's back. Her whip-like snake scimitar lashed out at the Paladin trying to skewer Miledi from behind with his spear.

"That hurts, you know?" Meiru said as the spear went straight through her chest. However, the Paladin barely had time to blink in surprise before Meiru's sword decapitated him. She recognized him as the knight who'd had the teleportation spell which had helped the pope retreat to the Holy Cathedral.

"Thanks, Meru-nee. Are you using your new skill?"

"Sure am. Though it's rather nauseating how badly it makes my vision blur."

Meiru had been able to preempt that surprise attack thanks to the new restoration magic spell she'd learned, Future Sight. The true nature of restoration magic was the ability to manipulate time, and once Meiru had realized that, she'd learned how to see a few seconds into the future.

"By the way, Oscar-kun, that attack broke through Metal Batlam's defenses."

"I see... It seems the Paladins have been buffed so much that Metal Batlam alone can't fully block these attacks," Oscar mused, swinging his gauntleted hand.

"Are those metal wires?!"

"They've been enchanted with spatial magic as well!"

As four apostles tried to close in on the group, they were stopped dead by Oscar's web of metal wires. They were extremely fine and enchanted with both Refraction and Perception Inhibitor, so even the apostles hadn't noticed them at first. Moreover, because they were enchanted with spatial magic, they could be locked in place at any time, so once you got entangled in them, it was impossible to get back

out.

Unfortunately, after a brief moment of surprise, the apostles started radiating disintegration magic to destroy the wires. Even with all the reinforcement Oscar had put into the wires, it took them only two seconds to melt them. However, those two seconds were more than enough for Miledi to finish casting her ultimate spell.

“Heavencrush.”

Four spheres of pure black destruction appeared in the four cardinal directions, one to an apostle. The apostles started groaning in pain as they tried to resist the crushing force of overwhelming gravity. And lucky for them, Lucifer’s Sanctified Purge was weakening Miledi just enough that the apostles weren’t instantly flattened.

Miledi furrowed her brow in frustration.

“What irksome magic,” Darrion said, thrusting his spear in front of him. He was the first Paladin who’d managed to escape Miledi’s Asura. Four beams of light then shot out of his spear, each one hitting one of Miledi’s Heavencrushes.

“Are you serious?!” Miledi shouted as she watched her spheres disperse. Darrion had wiped them out so thoroughly that it almost seemed like she’d canceled the spell herself.

“Miledi-chan! Oscar-kun!” Meiru shouted, running over to the two of them. “Torrential Bulwark!”

She then summoned up a wall of water just as bolts of lightning appeared out of nowhere. The flashes were so bright that the trio was momentarily blinded, and the boom of the thunder left their ears ringing.

Pure water was a perfect insulator, so Meiru’s wall actually made for the best defense against the lightning attack. But while it could keep the electricity out, it couldn’t absorb the full force of the impact. Thus, the water was blown away by the lightning blast, but not for long.

“Tetragrammaton!”

Meiru was able to instantly restore the barrier with restoration magic, but the sheer power of that attack left her a little stunned.

“Future Sight sure is helpful!” Miledi said with a smile.

“Yeah, but that was cutting it a bit close,” Oscar replied.

“Indeed. It’s been a while since an attack scared me that badly. I won’t be able to use restoration magic if their attacks shock me unconscious, you know?”

As the three of them bantered with each other, the Paladins finally started making their way up through Miledi’s Asura. And at the same time, dark clouds gathered in the sky above, the wind picked up, and lightning lanced through the air. A storm was brewing.

“I’ll keep the explanation simple,” Oscar said as he watched the

knights start to wreath themselves in mana. Quite a few of them had special magic that transformed their bodies, similar to Lilith and Zebal. Several knights were turning into ice, or flames, or wind, for example. Among all the flashes of white mana though, Darrion's mana stood out as it glowed golden.

"The reason your Heavencrashes were destroyed was because of his special magic, Golden Rule," Oscar explained.

"What's that?" Miledi asked, prompting Oscar to frown as he analyzed the data his glasses were giving him.

After Lyutillis had mastered evolution magic, he'd added the ability to analyze all information he saw to his glasses with her help. While it wasn't as accurate as Lyutillis's magic, it still told him enough.

"It's special magic that lets you copy your opponent's magic."

"Now that's just cheating!"

"Wait, does that mean he can use our magic as well?"

"I'm not sure how well he'll be able to wield ancient magic right after copying it, but yeah. At the very least, he can cancel out our spells. The one silver lining is that he can only copy one type of magic at a time."

Miledi stamped her foot midair, while Meiru massaged her forehead. Unfortunately, there was more bad news to come.

A pillar of silver light shot up from the Holy Cathedral. Lucifer had finally made his move. While the barrage of enchanted swords had turned the cathedral's roof into Swiss cheese, Lucifer and his four bodyguards remained unharmed.

"Are you telling me that's still not enough to stop it?" Oscar muttered. His goal with that barrage had been to destroy the Holy Cathedral and put a stop to both Divine Crusade and Sanctified Purge. But if all that damage wasn't enough to cancel those spells out, it meant there was a core somewhere powering them.

Meanwhile, the storm roiling above grew even stronger, with hail-filled twisters descending from the clouds and yet more lightning splitting the sky.

"Here it comes!" Meiru shouted as another blast of lightning came down. They knew if they stayed in one place they'd get focused down, so Miledi and the others split up in three directions.

"That's Stormlight, Lucifer's special magic," Oscar explained. "It lets him—"

"Control the weather, yeah! You can tell just by looking at it!" Miledi shouted, interrupting him.

"Men like to explain things to people, Miledi-chan! You'll make Oscar happy if you let him lecture you!" Meiru said with a grin.

"Now you're just teasing me, aren't you?!"

Sadly, that was all the joking around they could muster. Miledi was swiftly surrounded by a contingent of Paladins, and they'd all finished preparing their disintegration attacks.

"Don't underestimate me!" Miledi roared as she pulled several superdense metallic black balls from her Treasure Trove, which then started spinning around her at dizzying speed.

This was one of her new techniques, Satellite Blitz. By making a bunch of superdense objects orbit her at high speed, she could defend and attack simultaneously. After all, any knight who got too close to her would be sent flying by the balls.

Unfortunately for her, Darrion and two of the apostles were both fast and dexterous enough to slip through Miledi's defense net. She blocked the lightning above her with a Spatial Severance and quickly flew away to safety. She knew she wouldn't be able to handle Darrion in close combat, especially not if he had apostles backing him up. And so, she took off her three shawls and let them loose into the wind. The first billowed out like one big wave, the second coiled around Darrion, and the third coiled around his spear. While he was preoccupied with them, Miledi dueled the two apostles in the air. One blue streak and two silver streaks darted through the storm, evading lightning strikes and tornadoes.

As she watched Miledi fight out of the corner of her eye, Meiru shouted, "Damn, I've had enough of this!"

She was currently facing off against the group of knights that had turned themselves into fire, ice, and wind. None of her attacks were hitting while the knights were freezing, burning, and cutting her up in quick succession. But even as she coughed up blood and suffered third-degree burns, she kept using restoration magic to undo all the damage.

"Preserve your mana!" one of the knights shouted. "She doesn't have much combat potential. Just keep killing her until she's down for good!"

Meiru seethed upon hearing that and replied, "Oh, I don't have much combat potential, do I? Why don't I invite you to my domain, then?! Aerial Sea!"

That was Meiru's domain-creating spell. It summoned a sphere of water that was three hundred meters in diameter in the air, swallowing up the ten knights facing off against her and the one apostle who'd been heading her way. The knights were left at the mercy of the extreme water pressure and high-speed currents within the sphere. Honestly, it was amazing they didn't just die immediately. On the other hand, the apostle didn't feel any pain and thus kept blasting away at the water with disintegration magic, though Meiru simply regenerated it every time.

For a while, the two of them looped as the apostle destroyed the sphere and Meiru instantly regenerated it.

“Oooooo-kuuuuuuuuuuuun!”

While that was happening, Miledi was still struggling to fend off the two apostles and keep clear of the lightning strikes, as Darrion had managed to get rid of the shawls as well and had joined in the chase.

Miledi had to contend with disintegration attacks from two sides at once, and whenever Darrion saw an opening, he used his special magic to cancel out her gravity magic. Her Spatial Severance was nearing its capacity limit as well, with all the bolts it had taken.

“Do something, O-kun! I’m kinda in a bind here!”

“Well, I’m preoccupied too! Do something with your spheres or something!”

Miledi’s black spheres were more than just superdense lumps of metal. Oscar and the others had already seen before that the church had ways of interfering with their ancient magic, so of course they’d come up with countermeasures. Those spheres were one such thing. If someone managed to interfere with Miledi’s casting or disrupt the control of her mana, she could still cast gravity magic through the spheres by using them as focal points.

“Why are you so cold, O-kun?! I thought you loved me!”

“Shut up! I’ve got a lot going on, okay?! Save it for later!”

It was true that Miledi was able to deftly manipulate her orbs to keep Darrion at bay while also taking out more shawls to slow him down, but even if she didn’t actually need his help, she still pouted as she zoomed past him.

Even though she was ostensibly the one being driven into a corner, Miledi still had time to flirt with Oscar, a fact that irked Darrion quite a bit. As he lashed out in anger, his spear miraculously managed to dodge Miledi’s spheres, her shawls, and even the defense of her Metal Batlam and graze her side.

“Ngh, you bastard! I bet you wanna strip me with that spear and do all sorts of nasty things to me! You pervert! Eek, a pervert’s tearing my clothes off!”

As annoying as Miledi was acting, she was still firing off hundreds upon hundreds of spells each second to keep all of the lower-class Paladins at bay and also dealing with Darrion and the two apostles at the same time. Darrion couldn’t help but be impressed, though he was also still pissed off.

Oscar was so used to Miledi’s screaming that it didn’t even distract him as he focused on his task.

Come on... Where is it?

He was sifting through the massive amount of data his glasses were giving him as fast as possible. He’d summoned ten of his

upgraded Shadow Knight Lords to protect him while he worked. They were, of course, completely autonomous thanks to the spirit magic and metamorphosis magic they were enchanted with. There was one other new skill he was utilizing as well. Namely, Dance of a Hundred Blades. He had a hundred of his enchanted blades flying around him, attacking any knights that got close. These were special blades that were enchanted with autonomous flight magic, spatial magic, and the ability to cut through mana. And yet, even with a hundred of these insanely strong swords, he wasn't able to fully push the knights back.

"Even with my artifact armor, I'm still in a pickle. These guys sure are tough."

Oscar's left shoulder had been petrified, while his entire right side was paralyzed all because one of the knights had a petrification-type special magic and had looked at him for a few seconds. And at the same time, Oscar's blades were slowly being taken down and any knights he managed to injure got healed by other knights with healing special magic. However, it wasn't any of the knights that were the biggest threat.

"The same trick won't work twice," the apostle said as she cut through the threads Oscar tried to trap her with. She was easily able to get through his swords and his Shadow Knight Lords to head straight toward him.

"Don't worry, I've got plenty of new ones up my sleeve."

Oscar blocked the apostle's downward swing with his umbrella and grabbed her second claymore with his gauntlet as she went for a side slash. His artifacts' ability to devour mana and their extremely reinforced, super-compressed composition allowed them to just barely hold back the apostle's claymores. Furthermore, his metal threads, Metal Batlam, and his Ebony Coat all helped boost his strength to the level where he could match the apostle, while his upgraded glasses' perception-enhancing abilities allowed him to keep up with her speed.

The apostle seemed momentarily taken aback that Oscar had been able to block her attacks head-on, which proved to be her undoing. The sleeves of Oscar's Ebony Coat extended to grab the apostle's arm and push her sword away, while he unleashed mana shock waves from his umbrella to force her back. And once she was on the defensive, Oscar slashed diagonally up at the apostle.

There was an ear-splitting screech as his umbrella made contact with her.

"Ngh. How—?"

"Nice. Looks like I can cut through even your ridiculously tough body."

The apostle quickly put some distance between her and Oscar. There was a deep gash that started at her right shoulder and ran all

the way to her left side.

Oscar had used a super high-frequency chainsaw to cut through her skin. When he'd slashed his umbrella it had morphed, and the outer two ribs had transformed into mana-eating bladed chains that rotated at an extremely high frequency.

Upon seeing that the apostle had been injured, Darrion immediately turned around and shouted, "Focus on taking down Oscar Orcus first!"

In a way, Oscar was the most dangerous opponent for the knights. Unlike Miledi or Meiru, he didn't rely on magic or martial skill to fight. All of his strength came from the artifacts he'd created. And as a result, the cathedral's Sanctified Purge didn't weaken him as much as it did everyone else, though, on the other hand, he was far easier to kill than either Miledi or Meiru. He was the biggest threat, but also the one that was easiest to neutralize.

At Darrion's command, three of the Paladins gladly threw their lives away to open a hole in the Shadow Knight Lords' defensive formation for Darrion to rush through. And of course, the injured apostle took advantage of that opening as well.

Miledi fired off a series of insanely powerful lightning spears to try to back Oscar up.

"You just sit there and watch while your comrade dies," Sone said, moving in the way of the spears and using his special magic, Purge Territory, to dismantle them. Naturally, he wasn't strong enough to completely disperse Miledi's spells and was sent flying by the spears that had made it through, but he was able to keep Miledi from helping Oscar. And worse yet, because Miledi had taken the time to fire off such powerful spells to try to help Oscar, she'd given one of the apostles enough time to break through her shawls and close in on her.

Miledi quickly used her spheres to defend herself, but they weren't enough to fully block a barrage of disintegration feathers at point-blank range, so she was cut in numerous places. Thanks to Metal Batlam, she didn't suffer any serious injuries...and she knew Meiru would be able to heal her up soon, but she hadn't been able to help Oscar.

O-kun!

Her gaze met his. Darrion's spear passed through Oscar's defenses and stabbed him in the side, but he wasn't fazed at all.

It's fine. I've found what we're looking for... Oscar thought. And even if he didn't say anything, his gaze told Miledi everything she needed to know.

A second later, Oscar was sent flying downward as Darrion pulled his spear back and used his shield's mana shock waves to blast Oscar away.

Oscar had used his metal threads at the last second to lock Darrion in place and reduce the force of his shield bash, but even so, any normal person would have had their body shattered by the blow. Plus, the apostle added in her disintegration beam to really make sure she got him. And yet, Miledi wasn't worried in the slightest.

I'm counting on you, O-kun! Miledi screamed internally. She had absolute faith that he would return.

I know this was part of the plan, but man...I really don't want to do that again... Oscar thought to himself as pain lanced through him.

"I didn't think Longinus would be that strong!"

He held up his umbrella to block the apostle's follow-up disintegration beam. The force of the beam sent him flying even further, and he crashed into one of the Holy Cathedral's towers.

"Gah!"

Cracks radiated out from the wall and Oscar's breath was driven from his lungs, while blood spurted from the wound on his side. Metal Batlam had absorbed a lot of the shock of the impact, but it still hurt enough to nearly knock him out.

Gritting his teeth, Oscar made sure to keep his umbrella up to prevent the disintegration beam from killing him.

"I won't stop until you turn to dust," the apostle said simply.

"Perfect."

Pinned to the wall as he was, Oscar had nowhere to run. His umbrella was nearing its limits as well and was starting to crumble apart. Oscar kept bringing fresh materials out of his Treasure Trove to transmute emergency repairs, but he wasn't able to keep pace with the rate of disintegration. However, the excess girth of the beam that the umbrella couldn't cover was hitting the walls behind Oscar and slowly eroding them. The moment his umbrella gave out was the exact moment that the wall crumbled, so Oscar was sent flying into the cathedral.

"You're awfully tenacious. I didn't think there would be anything left of you after that," the apostle said, following him into the cathedral. However, once she made it inside, she didn't see Oscar anywhere. There was a hole in the floor though, which made it clear to her where Oscar had gone. The tower had a total of twenty floors, and the apostle was currently on the seventh one. Two floors down was the door leading to the central shrine.

"You're wasting your time," the apostle mumbled. She assumed Oscar was just trying to buy time to heal. She quickly flew through the hole to stop him, but to her surprise, the hole went all the way down to the ground floor, where Oscar was waiting for her. She figured he would have tried to leave the cathedral, but he'd decided against it.

"Have you finally given up?" she asked, wreathed in silver light.

Oscar said nothing. His back was resting against the wall and he had no umbrella or other shield. He had one hand on his wound and his eyes were closed.

Taking his silence as acquiescence, the apostle thrust one hand forward.

“You were a decently entertaining pawn,” she said, firing a disintegration beam right at Oscar’s heart.

“Perfect, it’s all done,” Oscar said in a light tone. He seemed not to have heard the apostle’s words at all as he thrust his gauntleted hand forward.

“Wha—?”

The apostle’s eyes widened in genuine surprise. Her ultimate attack, which could destroy anything and everything, had just been nullified. Oscar’s gauntlet had shot out a beam of sunlight that had completely countered her own.

“Thanks for your help, by the way,” Oscar said, adjusting his glasses with his free hand. His gratitude was genuine.

“Did you incorporate my disintegration magic into your artifact?!”

Oscar simply shrugged in response. Though that was, of course, exactly what he’d done. It was the true power of his gauntlet, after all.

The true nature of creation magic was the ability to manipulate all inorganic matter, including minerals and metals that possessed magical properties. In fact, when he made new artifacts with Miledi and the others’ help, he had them use their magic so he could imbue it into the material he wanted. And when he’d realized the fundamental concept behind what he’d been doing, Oscar had realized he could theoretically do the same with his enemies’ magic.



Of course, it hadn't been easy. Absorbing an opponent's magic in the middle of combat and then recreating it took an immense amount of skill. But luckily, Oscar Orcus was the greatest synergist who had ever lived, so of course he'd managed it. His umbrella's mana-absorbing ability had allowed him to siphon some of the disintegration beam that had been hitting it, and his glasses had let him analyze all of the information stored in that mana, then recreate it with his gauntlet. And as a result, his gauntlet was now capable of using disintegration magic.

"You have stolen the divine power granted to us by our lord."

"You mad?" Oscar asked, sinking into the wall behind him. He transmuted a hole exactly his size and shape, and then transmuted the wall back into place after moving through it.

"You won't escape me!"

"I think I will, actually."

As he said that, Oscar vanished completely into the wall. The apostle fired a disintegration beam at it, but—

"It's not disintegrating?!"

Just as she shouted that, the room began to rumble. She then heard a high-pitched screeching noise coming from all sides.

The walls suddenly all transformed into rotating blades. Even the floor and ceiling did, forcing the apostle to hover in the air. The stairs leading to the next floor were all blades as well. Then, the entire room was bathed in a golden glow and it started to shrink.

The apostle tried to blow open a hole in one of the walls with disintegration magic, but it failed to do anything again.

"You coated the entire room with disintegration magic?"

She realized her disintegration magic was being offset by disintegration magic, so instead, she pulled out her claymores and tried to cut through the walls. Unfortunately, the rotating blades rebuffed her swords, and even if her slashes could have broken through, Oscar would have just repaired them with transmutation.

This was his ultimate domain creation skill, Toy Box.

"You and your master love games, right? Well, how about a death game? Let's see if you can get out of this."

"Oscar Orcus!"

It was only now that the apostle realized that this had all been part of Oscar's plan. Her scream was filled with such rage that it was hard to believe the apostles were normally emotionless. That scream was the last sound she ever made too, since the box quickly closed in around her.

Oscar didn't even bother personally confirming the apostle's demise. His glasses told him all he needed to know, and he really

didn't want to see such a gory sight.

Oscar turned on his heel and started running deeper into the cathedral. Now that he had the strongest weapon in hand, it was time to destroy the source of all their troubles.

Meanwhile, the battle in the skies was heating up.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!"

"God, you're like a cockroach! Just die already!"

Miledi had lost all of her shawls, over half of her spheres, and was covered in numerous shallow wounds. On the other hand, Meiru's Aerial Sea had finally been destroyed for good and she was getting stabbed over and over again.

"Dance! Dance to please Lord Ehit!" Lucifer shouted in ecstasy. He figured this battle was as good as won.

Hundreds of lightning bolts rained down on Meiru and Miledi, the wind grew so strong it was difficult to even draw breath, and hail pelted them from all sides like a storm of bullets. Both of them were constantly bathed in sunset-orange light, and it was only a matter of time before Meiru ran out of mana, which she needed to keep healing them.

One of the apostles was poised to launch a perfect ambush from behind one of the tornadoes, but right when she was about to charge at them, something happened.

"Huh?!"

She turned to look down at the Holy Cathedral in shock, as did the other two apostles.

"I-Is something wrong?" Lucifer asked in confusion, thinking the apostle was looking at him.

Darrion and the others stopped their attack as well, worried about the sudden shift in the apostles' behavior.

"He took our magic."

"Oscar Orcus!"

Miledi and Meiru grinned upon hearing that, and a second later, the silver light that had covered the cathedral vanished.

"What?!" Lucifer shouted, shaken.

Darrion and the others looked down at their own bodies, frowning as they experimentally clenched and unclenched their fingers.

"Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha, see how the tables have turned! Hey, old man, how does it feel knowing you just got owned?! You were totally winning a second ago, but now you're about to get smacked *down*, you clown!" Miledi shouted, grinning.

"You're really in high spirits, Miledi-chan! I almost never see you act this annoying!" Meiru said as she clapped her hands together, smiling just as widely as Miledi.

Both Divine Crusade and Sanctified Purge had been dispelled.

“Don’t get cocky. This simply puts us on an even playing field,” Darrion said in a calm voice, seemingly unfazed. His job remained the same. He would fight, and die if necessary, for Ehit. The other Paladins were similarly calm.

“True. This is precisely the battle that Lord Ehit wishes to witness! Let us see if you’re worthy of being his chosen pawns!” Lucifer proclaimed as he spread his arms wide and once again started raining thunder down on Miledi. Darrion, his Paladins, and the remaining apostles all charged her as well.

However, right before they reached her, Miledi used her Dark Key to teleport to the Dark Gate Meiru had. Oscar teleported to it as well a second later.

“Meiru, can you still do this?”

“You bet. Leave it all to me.”

Oscar blocked the apostles’ disintegration beams with his own, while Miledi used her remaining spheres to stymie Darrion and his knights. Meiru, on the other hand, simply closed her eyes and concentrated while her comrades bought her time.

“Domain Creation - Stagnation!” she shouted a few seconds later, opening her eyes. A sphere of orange light then spread out from her, stopping Darrion and the three apostles in their tracks. Or rather, slowing them down so much that it looked like they’d stopped. In truth, they were still moving at a normal person’s walking speed, but considering the superhuman velocities everyone had been fighting at before, they may as well have been at a snail’s pace.

Stagnation was a spell that slowed down the flow of time for anyone Meiru chose within a fifty-meter radius.

Darrion narrowed his eyes and activated his Golden Rule. By changing the magic he was copying from Miledi’s to Meiru’s, he would be able to break out of this spell. Unfortunately, he was a second too late. Oscar now had gauntlets on both hands, and he fired disintegration beams out of both at Darrion. Darrion barely had time to bring his shield up to block, but even the vaunted Sacred Shield couldn’t stop disintegration magic, the strongest magic that Ehit had granted to only his perfect creations.

Darrion groaned in pain as his shield, and his entire left arm, turned to dust. However, the split-second his shield had bought him still had value. The remaining three apostles closed in on the group from left, right, and below.

“Meiru, it’s the one below us,” Oscar said, analyzing the three apostles with his glasses. Meanwhile, Miledi fired off high-level magic to either side to keep the remaining two apostles at bay while also defending against Lucifer’s thunderbolts.

Meiru stretched out her snake sword, coiling it around the apostle below.

“This won’t stop me,” the apostle said mechanically.

“Revival Reversal.”

“Ngh!”

The apostle’s left arm suddenly vanished, her armor was mostly torn off, and half of her body was covered in painful burns.

“It’s nice to meet you, Hearst-san. Goodbye.”

Indeed, this apostle was the same one who’d eaten a meteor back in the desert so long ago. Meiru had brought her old wounds back with Revival Reversal. As Hearst momentarily froze from the pain, a huge amount of dirt started falling toward her.

“Tetragrammaton.”

Meiru then used restoration magic to restore the dirt to its original form—a massive boulder made of sealstone. Oscar had deliberately broken this boulder so that Meiru could use it like this later and trap someone inside.



“Uwooooooooooh!”

With a spirited yell, Sone charged toward Meiru, blocking the spells Miledi threw at him with his Purge Territory. Darrion charged forward as well, his spear glowing brighter than it ever had before, and the rest of his Paladins followed behind him. Half of the knights were stopped by Oscar’s five remaining Shadow Knight Lords, while Oscar intercepted Sone personally, his glasses glowing faintly.

Hmph, I’ve already seen that trick. And if I know it’s coming, it can’t do a thing to me... Sone thought. He was already aware of Oscar’s glasses’ blinding flash. Closing his eyes, he relied on his other senses to keep track of his surroundings. He knew that if he could just get close enough, he’d be able to trap both Meiru and Miledi in his territory, even if it cost him his life.

Arrogantly thinking he’d gotten one up on Oscar, he continued forward...only to be hit by a surprise attack.

“Soul Shock.”

“Huh?!”

Caught off-guard, Sone lost control of his mana. His eyes flew open in surprise just in time to hear the words he’d been dreading.

“Super Glasses Beam.”

A blinding flash hit Sone in the eyes. He tried to fall back and heal, but for some reason, his consciousness seemed to be growing as dim as his eyesight. Right before he died, he realized through another knight’s telepathy what had happened to him.

Oscar’s new and improved beam didn’t just blind, it was a destructive ray of pure power. Moreover, that energy wasn’t coming from magic, but rather from hyper-focused sunlight. Part of Oscar’s glasses frames had actually been turned into a storage device to hold light and heat. He could only fire off this super beam once, but as it didn’t rely on magic Sone couldn’t guard against it with his Purge Territory.

Only a man as innovative as Oscar Orcus would have come up with the idea of firing sunlight from his eyes.

“Holy crap! Your glasses are super scary, O-kun!”

“Even worse, your naming sense is utterly awful, Oscar-kun.”

“Shut it, you two!”

“Heeey, Oscar, you never told us about that ability! Can our glasses do that too?! If not, when are we getting the upgraded versions?!”

“Naiz...I can’t believe you’ve become a glasses fanatic too!”

“That was amazing, O-chan-san! Glasses really do have the power to rule the world!”

“Don’t forget that this is a battlefield, you guys. Calm down.”

As soon as Sanctified Purge had been dispelled, teleportation to the Divine Mountain had become possible again, so Naiz, Vandre, Lyutillis, and Laus had all made their way over. Laus sighed and slapped Lyutillis on the back, reminding her to use her evolution magic on everyone.

"I-I didn't know you had a sadistic streak, Lau-chan-san—Supreme Ascendance!" Lyutillis exclaimed, casting her strongest evolution magic spell on Miledi and the others.

"Fight! Fight for Lord Ehit! Show him a crusade that shall go down in history!" Lucifer shouted in a crazed voice, making Darrion, the remaining knights, and the two surviving apostles' mana surge.

"Sorry, but this is the end of the line for your pathetic god," Miledi said in a deadly-serious voice. She then raised one hand into the air and a spiral of sky-blue mana shot up toward the heavens. It pierced the dark clouds, sending them scattering, and seemingly illuminated the entire world.

"Pope Lucifer. Don't think that the skies belong to you."

"You insolent little—!"

With her debuffs gone and Lyutillis's evolution magic enhancing her strength, Miledi was far stronger than Lucifer.

"Stop her even if it costs you your lives! There is no greater honor than martyrdom!" Lucifer screamed.

"Knights, fight until your last breath!" Darrion commanded.

A second later, they all charged at Miledi. But unfortunately for them, they wouldn't even be able to reach her. After all, unlike the last time Miledi Reisen had challenged Ehit, she wasn't alone. Now she had six comrades to guard her back...and they weren't going to let Darrion and his ilk lay even a finger on her.

Oscar fired off blast after blast of disintegration magic while also spreading his metal wires around to trap the knights. Meiru expanded the range of her time-slowing zone, catching an apostle and ten knights with it. Naiz also deployed an expanding space corridor to keep the other apostle from approaching, while hitting a few other knights with spatial explosions. Vandre took care of any knights that managed to slip past the others, while Lyutillis erected a manifold barrier around Miledi.

Darrion used his Golden Rule to copy Lyutillis's evolution magic to power himself up even further, but he had to contend with Laus, who was powered up by both evolution magic and his own Limit Break's final stage.

Miledi easily managed to counter Lucifer's magic, and sunlight shone down on Tortus once more.

"Starfall."

The name of Miledi's spell was an apt descriptor. A swarm of

meteors rained down, glinting in the light of the sun.

“Watch out above you! Retreat!” one of the apostles shouted. Unfortunately, that warning was pointless, since Oscar and the others had the knights and apostles trapped in place.

A second later, a meteor storm that Miledi had quite literally pulled out of space hit the Divine Cathedral. Friction had reduced the meteors to little more than fist-size, but at the speed they were going, that was still enough to do serious damage. There was an ear-splitting boom as the meteors obliterated the cathedral and the knights protecting it. And naturally, Miledi had perfect control over each of those meteors, so none of them even came close to the Liberators.

Darrion switched over to copying Naiz’s spatial magic and was able to erect a spatial barrier strong enough to protect him from the meteors. However, that took all of his attention, so he wasn’t able to stop Naiz from reaching through his barrier with spatial magic and hitting him directly with a Voidshatter. Naiz was strong enough that barriers were meaningless against him now.

Miledi’s meteor storm felt simultaneously endless and instantaneous. Regardless, once the barrage ended, there wasn’t a knight to be seen. Even Darrion and the two apostles had been sent spiraling to the ground.

Miledi let out a long breath, enjoying the cool breeze on her face. Slowly, the dust cloud around the Divine Cathedral began to fade.

“Miledi, look at that,” Oscar said.

“Hm?” Miledi mumbled as she looked in the direction Oscar was pointing and saw a single moving figure among the rubble. Then, she swiftly flew over to it.

“N-Ngh. Ha ha...”

It was Lucifer. He was broken and battered, but he was still crawling his way out from under the rubble.

“Y-Y-Y-You dare look down at me...you heretic?”

The majesty he normally exuded was nowhere to be found.

“Lord Ehit i-i-is absolute. Y-You’ll learn that soon enough,” he cackled madly.

Miledi waited quietly for him to finish, then asked, “Do you really believe all people are nothing more than Ehit’s toys? That it’s a sin to live as we please?”

“O-Of course it is! It’s the greatest sin there is! Pawns like us c-c-can only find happiness by...moving...as our god...wills...”

Ehit was absolute. People were nothing more than his possessions. Therefore, he was free to do whatever he wished with them. Their prosperity, their downfall, their tragedies, they were all nothing more than entertainment to appease his boredom. Mortals did not have the right to free will. The pope of the Holy Church breathed his last

believing that to the very end.

"I see. Well, that's why we're tolling the bells of revolution," Miledi muttered, then looked up at the sky. Her comrades had already gathered at the entrance to the cathedral's inner sanctum, as the multicolored barrier surrounding it remained completely intact. Naiz had already tried using spatial magic to break through, but he'd been unsuccessful.

"Lyu, you're better at appraising than anyone. What are you getting from this barrier?"

"I'm not sure. It doesn't fall under any category of ancient magic. All I'm picking up is this strong will that says, 'nothing shall despoil this sanctuary,'" Lyutillis replied, shaking her head in confusion.

"It's fine!" Miledi replied with a grin as she held out a hand toward the barrier. Mana swirled around her. There was more of it than anyone had ever seen before, and she was controlling it with perfect precision.

Oscar and the others placed their hands on Miledi's shoulders and back, then started transferring their mana to her, praying fervently for her success.

"Let's do this—Heavencrush!"

A huge black sphere swallowed the inner sanctum whole. Black sparks shot out of it, causing the air around it to crackle, and it sucked in all of the nearby rubble, as well as a good chunk of the mountain itself.

Miledi wasn't able to fully control a spell of this magnitude, so Naiz was forced to put up a spatial barrier to protect everyone. And yet, the multicolored barrier refused to break. It was clearly made from something beyond mortal understanding.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" Miledi shouted, her cries echoing through the sky above the Divine Mountain.

If this didn't work, nothing would. However, no one present even considered the possibility of failure. They all believed in Miledi...and they all wished for revolution from the bottom of their hearts. And so, they shouted together with her, hoping that their determination had the power to change the world. They fervently prayed for a future where everyone could live as they pleased, a future where everyone would be free to live in harmony if they so chose, a future free from Ehit's shackles.

"It's time to liberate this world!" all seven of them shouted at once. And in that instant, they felt linked to each other in a way that had never happened before. They were so perfectly in sync that their wills melded into one. And they could feel that singular will give birth to something new.

At that moment, they all grew keenly aware that they would

succeed.

“Breaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaak!”

Cracks started to show along the multicolored barrier. Whatever will was sustaining it seemed to be losing against that of Miledi and her friends.

Eventually, there was a fierce gust of wind and Miledi’s Heavencrush shrunk. The inner sanctum, along with the rest of the cathedral, got sucked into it and was ground into dust.

After the Heavencrush vanished, all that remained was a caldera on the surface of the mountain.

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For a few minutes, no one said a word. Miledi and the others’ heavy panting was the only sound that could be heard. They all felt like they’d lost more than just their mana and stamina. Every form of energy that powered their body had been depleted, leaving them more exhausted than they’d ever felt before.

Miledi looked quietly up at the sky. The marble pillar that connected Ehit to the world had been destroyed. Thus, his control of their world had been severed.

So, what’re you gonna do now? Miledi thought. Come down and fight us directly? Well, we’re not gonna run, so do your worst! Or what, can you not do anything anymore now that your pillar’s gone?

It was possible the pillar really had been that significant, considering how heavily it had been guarded. Though if that wasn’t the case, Miledi was still ready to fight.

Oscar and the others stood beside Miledi, their wills just as strong as hers. Enough time passed that everyone caught their breath...but nothing happened.

“Does that mean...it’s over?” Laus asked, looking unsure.

After a few more seconds, Miledi finally turned back to face her comrades.

“Ha ha ha, we did it!” she said with a smile, throwing both hands into the air.

Oscar and the others exchanged glances, then smiled back at her and gave Miledi a series of high fives.

Down below in the palace, the battle between the Holy Templar Knights and the Liberators was nearing its end.

Most of the captains and vice-captains had been slain, and the two Paladins, Torres and Seys, finally showed an opening when they looked up at the sky, dumbfounded.

“Surprised that all your comrades are dead?” Badd asked,

decapitating Torres with his scythe.

"You finally showed an opening," Chris said, slaying Seys in the same moment.

The only captain-class knight left among the Holy Templar Knights was Lelei, but she was heavily wounded, had lost her weapon, and was struggling to command the two hundred knights remaining under her command.

The Liberators had lost a considerable number of men as well, and most of them had fully depleted their Metal Batlams and other defensive tools, but their morale was far higher. Exhausted as they were, their will to resist Ehit to the very end continued to give them strength.

Just then, a voice rang out across the battlefield, saying, "Everyone, this is Miledi Reisen, the leader of the Liberators, the anti-church resistance group."

Badd and the others grinned upon hearing that.

Meanwhile, the remaining knights looked desolately up at the sky through the hole in the castle walls. There, they saw...

On the eastern side of the city, Lestina and her personal troops were protecting the trees around the central plaza.

"These guys are such a pain," Lestina muttered as she cut down another knight. No matter how many of them she took down, more just kept on suicidally charging forward, screaming about their devotion to Ehit and their love of martyrdom.

"General, we received a message from the Liberators! There's a family of three nearby that failed to evacuate!"

"What?!"

Just then, Lestina spotted a couple and their young daughter sprinting out of an alleyway. They must have thought the central plaza was safe, which was why they'd come this way. Unfortunately, with Lac Elain's barrier up, it was impossible to get inside. Moreover, the knights were still looking for opportunities to take civilians hostage and use them against the Liberators.

"Get them!"

Two of the knights chased after the family. For a moment, they thought aid had finally come, but then they saw the madness in the knights' eyes and their hope turned to despair.

Of course, they'd obviously been taught to give their lives for Ehit if necessary, just like every other citizen, but the couple still huddled protectively over their daughter.

"God, what a pain!"

There was a boom and a blistering wave of heat erupted before them, causing the parents to hug their daughter even tighter. But

while they shut their eyes, the little girl saw what was going on through the gap in her parents' arms. A blazing demon was standing in front of the family, protecting them from the knights' attacks with her flaming twin swords. Meanwhile, the demon's subordinates pincered the knights and took them out.

Panting, Lestina took a Summoning Circle out of her Treasure Trove and turned back to the family. The girl could clearly make out Lestina's flaming red hair and dark skin.

"So pretty..." she muttered.

"Hm?"

Lestina had expected the girl to react with fear, confusion, and disgust like every other civilian she'd saved until now. She was so surprised by the girl's praise that for a moment she forgot to activate the Summoning Circle.

While Lestina was frozen, the girl untangled herself from her parents' arms and ran over. Lestina staggered backward, looking more shaken than she had when fighting the knights. The girl then took a small rock out of her pocket. It was a perfectly ordinary stone, though it was vaguely shaped like a heart.

"Here!"

"Wh-What?! What are you planning?!"

"Thank you for saving me, pretty lady!"

The girl took Lestina's hand and placed the rock in it.

Lestina stared at the rock in confusion. She felt like she should say something in response, but couldn't think of what. After glancing around awkwardly, she finally said, "H-Hmph. I'll take the present, but don't misunderstand! I'm still a proud member of the demon race! I feel nothing for you puny humans!"

She blushed with embarrassment and didn't even notice the pointed stares her subordinates gave her.

Are you really gonna say that to a kid, General?

Just then, Miledi Reisen's voice rang out across the battlefield.

"Woooooow!" the young girl said, looking up at the sky.

Miledi and her six companions were hovering above the north end of the capital's central plaza, the sun and the Divine Mountain at their backs. The fact that all seven of them were translucent made it clear to Lestina that they were projecting holograms of themselves from somewhere.

"We have vanquished the pope, his Paladins, and even God's Apostles."

The commotion in the plaza died down and even the knights who'd been trying to break their way in stopped to listen to Miledi's words.

"What does vanquish mean?" the little girl asked.

“It means she beat the bad guys,” Lestina explained, deciding to wait a little before activating the Summoning Circle. For some reason, she wanted to listen to Miledi’s speech with the girl by her side.

Around the same time, the battle at the east gate was winding down.

“Haaah, haaah, thanks for coming to the rescue, Hero.”

“Haaah, haaah, and thank you for the assist, General Elga.”

Reinheit and Elga were both on their knees, the corpses of Ajeen and Eddy lying before them.

“Can you stand?” Reinheit asked.

“Ha ha, I’m afraid these old bones are at their limit.”

Elga was severely wounded. Reinheit’s healing magic had closed up any fatal injuries, but he wouldn’t be able to walk for quite some time. Reinheit himself was covered in injuries as well, his armor was completely destroyed, and the aftereffects of using Limit Break had him struggling to stay upright.

“I never thought the day would come where the hero, of all people, would be lending me his shoulder. I guess it was worth it to live this long.”

“I also never imagined I’d be fighting side by side with a demon general.”

The two of them smiled awkwardly at each other. It would take a while before either of them could move, but fortunately, they wouldn’t need to.

“Oh, it looks like the battle’s over already,” Elga said, looking up at the sky.

“Thank goodness you won...Miledi-san.”

Reinheit gazed up at the hologram of Miledi and the others.

“People of the world, what did you feel as you watched today’s events unfold?”

Elga and Reinheit breathed sighs of relief as they settled in to listen to Miledi’s speech.

Outside the east gate, Rasul had finally overpowered Outar.

“What is that...?” Habeel muttered as she looked up at the sky. At the same time, Outar and the Shadow Emperor both crumbled away.

Smiling, Rasul replied, “An artifact called Skynet, apparently.”

“Sky-what?”

“Skynet. It lets you project your appearance and voice over long distances. I imagine you must realize what this means?”

Habeel narrowed her eyes in confusion, but then a second later, the realization hit her and she gulped.

“What did you think of the way the church’s knights fought...and

Pope Lucifer's words?"

Habeel's blood ran cold as she realized everyone across the world must have been watching everything.

She stared at Rasul, praying he would deny her suspicions, but Rasul simply shrugged and said, "I'm sure all the countries, cities, and even villages around the world are in an uproar right now. After all, they saw the whole thing from beginning to end."

That was the true purpose of the Skynets Oscar had developed. Miledi had wanted a way to broadcast their fight with the church to the whole world. She'd wanted everyone to hear the bells of revolution.

"I have to stop her!" Habeel shouted, flapping her wings. But before she could go more than a few meters, Rasul's bloodred sword blocked her path.

"Don't waste your life. Just sit there and listen," Rasul said, still smiling. And unfortunately, all Habeel could do was glare at him.

In the sky above the central plaza, the church's airships had stopped attacking Lac Elain. Salus was taking advantage of the lull to watch Miledi's speech from the bridge.

"All that running about was worth it," Salus muttered.

In order to broadcast the battle to the whole world, the Liberators had first had to set Skynets in every major population center. Of course, they'd put some down in the theocracy's capital as well, and the citizens had all been watching through the Skynet in the plaza.

"Us mortals are Ehit's pawns, so we shouldn't complain regardless of what he wants to do with us. Can any of you truly accept that philosophy?" Miledi asked.

Of course, many of the capital's citizens hurled insults at her when she said that. Their faith in their god was unshaken, and the mere insinuation that they should turn their back on him filled them with rage. But at the same time, many of the people in other countries were heeding Miledi's words, and there were even a few within the theocracy itself that seemed like they were being swayed.

"I know I can't! And that's why I want to change the world!"

Most of the other nations' leaders looked like they'd come to a decision as well. And upon seeing their resolve, Salus breathed a sigh of relief and settled back into his chair.

"Good luck, Miledi," Mikaela said. A second later, Salus whispered the same.

"Do you really think we'll be able to change the world?" Sui asked as she walked over to Sim, who was still keeping an eye on the remaining knights. Now that things had calmed down, she'd returned

to her usual self.

Miledi was explaining how the battle between humans and demons had all been instigated by Ehit, and that there was no reason for them to fight each other.

Sim smiled wryly and replied, “Who knows. If the world was that easy to change, someone else would have done it by now.”

“Huh?”

“But if you don’t take action, then you won’t be able to accomplish anything. The real battle is just beginning, but that doesn’t mean it’s a lost cause.”

“Oh, count me out for that battle. I’m tired of working.”

“That’s fine,” Sim said, patting Sui on the head. She’d already done more than enough, and he was honestly grateful for all her hard work.

“I’m not asking you to throw away your beliefs,” Miledi said. “But...”

Her earnest voice echoed all over the world. Every person on Tortus waited with bated breath for her next words. They could tell her speech was from the heart, and not a bunch of rehearsed platitudes. Her heartfelt words grabbed the people’s attention far better than any pre-written speech could have.

“Won’t you please at least part ways with a history that was written for us by a god who doesn’t even care about our lives? Our history should be created by our own choices, don’t you agree? Wouldn’t you—?”

I wonder what the remaining knights will do... Sim thought warily. While the Schnee clansmen had shown up to reinforce the beastmen, they were all in pretty sorry shape. If the fight resumed, victory would come at a heavy cost.

Back at the Divine Mountain’s summit, Miledi sucked in a deep breath.

“Wouldn’t you like to be free to choose your own path in life?!”



After screaming her heart out, Miledi fell silent. She'd said everything she needed to. She'd explained who the Liberators were, what they'd done, and what their goals were. The question was, had her words resonated with the people?

Did my words change anything inside them?

Miledi looked up at the sky, her expression tinged with worry. Feeling a gaze on her back, she turned around and saw her friends all gazing warmly at her.

It'll be okay... their eyes seemed to say.

Of course, there were still some pressing matters that needed to be addressed. If the Templar Knights refused to surrender, Miledi and the others would need to fight them to the death, and if they did surrender, they'd need to be imprisoned in the palace. They also needed to invite all the various nations' leaders into the palace to hold a meeting about how humanity would move forward, then figure out what to do with the capital's citizens. Fortunately, some of those questions had been answered in a secret meeting Miledi had held with the various world leaders ahead of time.

Forgetting for a moment that the world was still watching her, Miledi slapped her cheeks to psych herself up. However, just as she was about to take the first step toward a new future—

"I order you in the name of Ehit—shut your mouth," an androgynous voice said, and Miledi's mouth shut of its own accord. She glanced around in surprise. Oscar and the others tried to call out to her, but they couldn't speak either.

"I order you—kneel."

Everyone's knees buckled, then their heads started lowering into a bow. A force so powerful it chilled Miledi and the others to their very cores was forcing their bodies to act against their will. And yet, they refused to kneel. Everyone in the world was watching them right now, so the one thing they couldn't do was kneel before Ehit.

"Uwooooooooooooooooooh!"

With a scream, Laus's pitch-black mana surged and he freed Miledi and the others from Ehit's control. Then, they all glared up at the sky.

"Ehit!" Miledi spat.

It seemed Ehit didn't need that pillar to manifest in the world after all. He'd clearly been waiting for Miledi to make her speech before coming down and forcing her to kneel in order to humiliate her as much as possible.

A silver storm brewed in the sky above, looking both wondrous and terrible at the same time.

"How boring. You failed to meet any of my expectations," Ehit

said in an apathetic voice. “What an utter disappointment.”

Ehit had wished for a desperate struggle that ended in tragedy and despair, he wished to see Miledi and the others experience the loss of everyone important to them. But in the end, they had proven too strong for that outcome.

“It seems this era is a failure.”

The way Ehit felt about all the struggles the Liberators had faced thus far was the same way a child felt about a game they were really interested in setting up, but then tried playing and found it wasn’t all that fun.

Miledi seethed at the utter callousness in Ehit’s words.

“If you don’t like how things went, then come down here and fight us, you bastard! We’ll show you how strong mortals can be!”

“Just how strong mortals can be?” Ehit asked in a curious voice.

“Hmm, I see. Very well,” he said, his apathetic tone replaced by clear amusement.

Miledi suddenly felt as though she’d made a huge mistake.

“Please, show me how strong you are, you pawns who’ve seen too much and grown too powerful.”

Even though he’d had the symbol of his power destroyed and his primary pawns annihilated, Ehit still acted as though Miledi was completely beneath him. And because he found Miledi unworthy of his attention, he wasn’t even going to face her personally. A god didn’t need to personally duel unruly pawns to put them in their place, after all.

No, Ehit would simply test Miledi and the others. He would show the yapping dogs who their master truly was.

“Struggle until your last breath. Appease my boredom for as long as you can.”

“What are you...?” Miledi trailed off, while Oscar and the others gaped openly.

God’s Apostles started pouring out of the silver vortex in the sky. And not just ten or twenty either. No, there were tens of thousands of them, enough to cover the entire sky.

“Lyu-chan!”

“I know! Supreme Ascendance!”

“Heavencrush!”

The same sphere that had obliterated the pillar appeared in the center of the apostles. Five hundred apostles were crushed immediately.

Miledi and the others had planned for a situation like this. Honestly, they’d expected that Ehit would send an army of apostles down once his pawns had been defeated.

Still, even an army of a thousand apostles could be dealt with so

long as they knew where they were coming from. Miledi would simply obliterate them all with a powerful gravity spell. Not even apostles could avoid the power of gravity magic. And if there were more than a thousand, Miledi would keep on using the same spell until they were all crushed.

Unfortunately, they didn't just spring out from one location.

"Shit! He can send them out from anywhere?!" Oscar shouted as he analyzed the information coming into his glasses. He had built a Skynet into his lenses, so he could see what was going on below in the capital, and he saw another swirling silver vortex had appeared right above the palace.

"Nacchan! We need to get to where Ehit is! We have to go through that vortex!"

"I'm trying to get us there! But...shit! I'm sorry."

The frustration in Naiz's voice made it clear that even after understanding the true nature of spatial magic—the ability to manipulate boundaries—he still couldn't push his way into Ehit's domain.

Laus couldn't sense any souls on the other side of the vortex either. Lyutillis couldn't appraise what the vortex was even made of, nor could Miledi find any way to destroy it. Whatever it was, it was beyond even ancient magic.

Miledi and the others' expressions stiffened. They definitely hadn't underestimated Ehit's power. Had it not been for the public execution, they would have spent as much time as they could gathering information on him and ways to beat him. However, they'd believed that at their current level of strength, they had a good chance of defeating him. Only now did they realize how naive they'd been.

Still, Miledi fought on valiantly, exclaiming, "What, too scared to fight us yourself, Ehit?! No one will follow a god who hides away and lets his puppets do all the fighting for him! There's no future for you if you don't fight us!"

"You seem to be under a grave misunderstanding," Ehit replied with a mocking laugh. "I *am* the future."

Ehit was the arbiter of all prosperity and decline, of all creation and destruction, in all of its forms.

"It is I who should ask you, Miledi Reisen. Do *you* have a future?"

Ehit's second vortex was poised to spill an army of apostles into the capital and slay every innocent citizen left within it. Miledi bit her lip so hard she drew blood.

Oscar gently laid a hand on her trembling shoulder and said, "Miledi. We've already accomplished our main objective."

His composed voice helped Miledi calm down.

"We've saved who we came to save and delivered the message we

came to deliver. Isn't that right?"

Oscar was speaking sense, but that didn't make this situation any less vexing. Miledi sorely wished to take Ehit out here and now. However, so long as they had no way of reaching his domain, they couldn't stop him from spewing out apostles and turning the city into a battlefield. Even at their current level of power, Miledi and the others wouldn't be able to kill all the apostles while protecting the citizens...and it would go against the Liberators' creed to sacrifice innocents for their cause.

"We're retreating!" Miledi shouted, the order reaching everyone thanks to the Skynets.

"You got it. Does plan 2 sound good to you, Miledi?" Salus asked. He, too, had realized the necessity of retreat, and so he was already primed to leave.

Plan 2 had been created with precisely this scenario in mind, so it was the perfect choice. Miledi and the others would serve as bait together with Lac Elain, while everyone else scattered to the four winds via Oscar's Dark Gates.

"Remember, my princess, this isn't the end. I'm looking forward to our eventual reunion," Rasul said.

"Your Highness, leave the beastmen to me. Miledi-dono, if we both survive this ordeal, let us meet again," Sim said.

"Yo, Miledi, that was a pretty good speech. We did what we came here to do. I bet you the world's definitely gonna change after this, so you can run with your head held high, all right?" Badd said.

Laus confirmed they'd all left via soul detection magic, while Miledi dispelled her Heavencrush.

"This isn't the end. We'll be back to kill you before you know it!" she shouted.

However, the only reply she received was Ehit's echoing laughter.

Salus was overseeing the retreat from the main deck of Lac Elain.

"How much longer until our retreat's complete?!" he shouted as he watched an endless army of apostles pour through the silver vortex.

While the knights were cheering on the arrival of the apostle swarm, the citizens looked quite scared of what they were seeing.

"We're all good here. Everyone's pulled out!"

The Liberators had planned this retreat in advance, so everyone had already been ready to escape via the Dark Gates.

"All right, prepare to teleport!" Salus shouted as he started propelling Lac Elain toward the palace. He knew the airship wouldn't be able to protect the central plaza from this many apostles, so he was trying to put as much distance between Lac Elain and them as possible.

“Our barrier’s been demolished! We only have twenty percent of our mana left!”

“We’ve lost seventy-five percent of our outer armor! The whole ship’s riddled with holes!”

“We’ve lost an engine! At this rate, we’ll be sunk!”

Just as things were starting to look dicey, a huge black sphere swallowed up the silver vortex. At the same time, a series of explosions and massive hammer swings knocked away all the apostles near the ship.

Miledi and the others had arrived to save the day. Unfortunately, that meant they’d left the vortex up above unattended, so an army of apostles so large they looked like a massive cloud was descending from the eight-thousand-meter high peak of the Divine Mountain.

“Hurry it up, old man!” Miledi shouted.

“I know, I know! How much longer?!” he shouted at one of the techs.

“One moment... Mana charge complete! We can teleport at any time!”

“All right, let’s go!”

Lac Elain picked up speed and charged at the royal palace. However, Salus wasn’t planning on ramming it a second time. The teleporter activated just before they hit the walls, creating a spatial distortion in front of the ship’s prow.

Miledi and the others served as the rearguard, allowing Lac Elain to fly through the portal. The view from the bridge suddenly showed new scenery, telling Salus that the teleportation had been successful. They’d gone three hundred kilometers north of the Divine Mountain. If they could fly just another fifty kilometers, they’d be able to reach the ocean and dive.

Many of the airship’s outer walls had been destroyed, exposing the inner rooms to the elements, and black smoke was pouring out of the engines, but it was still functional. As Lac Elain limped its way toward the ocean, Miledi and the others suddenly appeared on the bridge.

Miledi was clutching her chest, worried about the comrades who were still in the middle of retreating and grieving the loss of those who hadn’t made it. She was also lamenting her own weakness, as well as the fact that she hadn’t even been able to touch Ehiti.

“You could stand to look a little happier, you know?” Salus said gently.

The Liberators’ plan had more or less succeeded. They’d rescued their comrades, revealed the truth about Ehiti to the world, destroyed the myth that the church was untouchable, and delivered the Liberators’ message all across Tortus. Though obviously, Salus also knew it was only the older folk like him who could keep a positive

outlook in this situation.

For a while they flew in silence, allowing everyone to come to terms with the turbulent series of events that had just occurred. Unfortunately, they didn't have much time to rest.

After a few minutes, Miledi suddenly turned around and shouted, "Sal! They're coming!"

The bridge was immediately back on high alert.

"Prepare the teleporter!" Salus shouted.

However, the tech screamed back, "We can't! We don't have enough mana!"

"We're moving to retreat plan 2-2!"

"Got it! Get ready!"

Lac Elain creaked ominously, and Salus gingerly patted his armrest, muttering, "Hold out just a bit longer for us, please."

Looking out the window, he saw a series of silver comets chasing after the airship. Over a thousand apostles were heading their way.

"Are they after Lac Elain?!" Oscar shouted.

It did indeed look like they were targeting Lac Elain over Miledi and the others. Or rather, they were after the passengers inside the airship.

"Ehit really is one nasty fucker!" Vandre shouted, transforming into a full dragon and protecting Lac Elain's rear while he fired off breath attacks at the apostles.

Naiz created a spatial expansion barrier, while Meiru cast a slow zone around the apostles to delay their attacks. Miledi and Oscar used gravity and disintegration magic respectively to thin out the apostles' numbers, while Laus created as many clones as he could to wreak havoc among the apostles' ranks. The whole time, Lyutillis cast evolution magic on everyone to support them, of course.

Unfortunately, Miledi and the others were still exhausted from their earlier battle, and they couldn't produce as much firepower. Whatever they had done to destroy the inner sanctum's barrier had taken something out of them that still hadn't recovered. If they let their guard down for even a moment, their defensive line would be breached. They didn't even have the resources to spare on repairing Lac Elain.

"Hold out just a bit longer, everyone! We're almost to the ocean!" Miledi shouted, prompting everyone to rally for one last push. No matter what happened, they would protect their comrades on Lac Elain.

A dozen minutes passed, during which enough shots got through that Lac Elain lost its flotation power and started slowly losing altitude.

"Commander, we're within effective range!" the lookout shouted

as the ocean came into view.

“All right, everyone, abandon ship!” Salus shouted.

Everyone used a Dark Gate to perform an emergency escape. They were all teleporting to a second ship that was hidden in a rocky reef near the coast. It wasn’t just Lac Elain Oscar had modified, he’d also upgraded another ship—the Melusine.

However, the Melusine was only a third as large as Lac Elain, meaning it was quite cramped with everyone on board. Desperate times called for desperate measures though, and this plan required using Lac Elain as bait to facilitate the Liberators’ escape.

“Miledi, we’ve all escaped!” Salus shouted, prompting Miledi to turn to Laus. Laus, in turn, used spirit magic to confirm that there was no one left on Lac Elain, then nodded to Miledi.

“Time to get out of here!” Miledi shouted.

Oscar and the others all congregated around Naiz. A second later, he teleported them all to safety. And as they left, a barrage of silver beams ripped through Lac Elain, putting an end to the storied submarine-cum-airship’s long history.

Meanwhile, Salus, Miledi, and the others waited with bated breath on the Melusine’s now metal-coated deck to see if the apostles followed. The northern ocean was filled with shallow reefs for a good one hundred and twenty kilometers or so, meaning they couldn’t dive with the Melusine and had to pray the apostles didn’t find them. In the distance, they could see Lac Elain going down from the concentrated barrage of a thousand apostles. Salus sighed sadly as he watched the home he’d spent half his life in get destroyed.

Eventually, Lac Elain was completely eviscerated and the barrage stopped. Everyone was praying that the apostles would simply turn and leave, but then Mikaela said in a strained voice, “They’re coming. They found us!”

“Sal, full speed ahead! We need to get clear of the shallows and dive!”

“Miledi...”

“Don’t even think about finishing that sentence, Sal!”

Miledi knew exactly what Sal was about to say. The apostles had targeted Lac Elain obsessively, meaning that they’d almost certainly go after Salus and the others again, which meant that Miledi and the others would be able to escape while Salus served as bait.

Everyone on board was more than willing to throw their lives away for Miledi, and that scared her more than anything. After all, she didn’t want anyone dying for her sake. But at the same time, she realized that all of the ancient magic users were nearing their limits.

“There’s no way I’m letting you guys die,” Miledi said, glaring at the oncoming horde of apostles.

Panting, Oscar and the others lined up next to Miledi. They would stick with her to the very end.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Just then, a series of roars rang out and thousands of beams of light shot toward the apostles.

Everyone stared on in shock while Mikaela shouted, “Those are...dragons! A flock of dragons is coming in from the east!”

Miledi and the others turned eastward to see an army of dragons five thousand strong advancing on the apostles.

“No, wait. Those are—!”

As someone who shared their blood, Vandre could tell immediately that they weren’t just dragons, but rather transformed dragonmen.

“We have come to aid you at the behest of our king. I am one of Astlan the Dragon Kingdom’s generals, Grice Schnee.”

As the wave of breath attacks pushed the apostles back, an ice dragon with beautiful indigo scales flew down to the Melusine and introduced himself.

“Schnee?” Miledi asked as everyone turned to face Vandre.

Grice also looked at Vandre with his slit-like draconic eyes and said in a gentle voice, “I cannot have my grandson dying here. Please hurry and retreat from this battlefield.”

Everyone was bursting with questions—Vandre most of all—but one thing was for certain. The Liberators wouldn’t lose any more of their members today.

Chapter II: The Dragon Kingdom and an Old Legend

After the Liberators left the capital, one of the remaining Holy Templar Knights desperately tried to heal Lelei, the last remaining captain of the regiment.

“Lelei-sama! Please don’t leave us!”

Coughing up blood, Lelei looked up at the knight with unfocused eyes and asked, “What’s...the situation?”

“Rejoice, Lelei-sama! God didn’t abandon us after all. He summoned an endless army of apostles and forced the heretics to retreat!”

“What about...the commanders?”

Lelei was, of course, asking about Kaime and Selm, who’d been appointed to lead the Holy Templar Knights after Laus had defected.

“We believe they were kidnapped. Please, don’t speak. Just focus on your recovery for now.”

With how crippled the Holy Templar Knights were, they couldn’t afford to lose their last remaining leader. The knights wouldn’t know what to do if she died too.

Lelei realized just how badly they needed her as well, so she let herself be treated without kicking up a fuss. She closed her eyes and let the magic wash over her.

“Hm? Nnngh! Gaaah! Wh-What the—?! Who are you?! Stop!” she suddenly shouted, gripping her head and writhing around in pain.

“Lelei-sama?! What’s wrong?!”

The other surviving knights rushed over and cast their healing spells on her as well. But a few seconds later, Lelei’s fit ended as abruptly as it started.

“L-Lelei-sama?” one of the knights said timidly. Lelei remained still for a second, after which her eyes shot open.

“Sorry, it’s nothing. Continue your treatment,” she said in an emotionless voice, her gaze surprisingly cold. Confused, the knight resumed casting healing magic.

After five minutes, Lelei’s most serious injuries had healed and she waved the knight away as she rose to her feet. She then ordered her knights to round up the survivors while she walked over to the palace’s crumbled wall and looked down at the capital, where she could see five apostles chipping away at the giant tree in the plaza

with disintegration magic.

Sensing a familiar presence behind her, she turned around and said, "I see you survived, Hearst-sama."

"Us apostles are simultaneously one and infinity. As an immortal being, it would be impossible for me to die."

It was indeed the same Hearst that Meiru had sealed away that came to stand next to Lelei. The injuries she'd suffered from Revival Reversal were completely gone.

"There's no need to act humble. We all know that you're the first of our lord's apostles, as well as his favorite."

Hearst didn't reply. She almost seemed to be feeling regret over the fact that her master had needed to heal her not once, but twice now, so instead, she asked in a pointed voice, "Shouldn't you be worrying more about yourself? You lost everything."

"I can't argue with that. I really did lose it all. As time passes, there are fewer and fewer people born with powerful special magic. It might not be possible for me to collect hosts of as high a quality as before."

"I was asking after your soul, not your body."

Lelei placed a hand to her chest, cocked her head, and replied, "I did lose a bit of it during my defeat, but I've managed to integrate with this host quite well. Either way, I won't die until I retrieve the Holy Sword. She belongs to me, after all."

Lelei's last sentence was spoken with an inordinate amount of obsessive zeal.

Hearst simply said, "I see," and turned on her heel.

"But for now, we are to leave the Liberators be. I shall make the preparations for this era's final act, so in the meantime, I need you to control the situation."

"As you wish."

Hearst flapped her wings and flew away.

"U-Umm, Lelei-sama?" one of the knights asked. He'd come to ask for further instructions, but had been waiting for Lelei to finish her conversation with the apostle. He seemed understandably confused by the familiarity with which Lelei had been addressing Hearst.

"I've decided to abandon that name. From now on, you can call me Darrion Kaus," the woman once known as Lelei said, causing the knight to feel even more confused.

Ten days had passed since the decisive battle at the theocracy's capital.

Miledi was sitting on the porch of a beautiful two-story wooden mansion, her legs dangling over the edge. She was wearing a pale-green yukata instead of her usual dress. Her hair was down, and she

was gazing idly at the garden below. Her eyes didn't seem to be taking in any of the splendid views, however. It was hard to tell if she was lost in thought, or simply not thinking at all. Moreover, she looked at once both serene and composed, and impatient and worried. Whatever the case, she was clearly not her usual annoying self, that much was certain. It was hard for anyone to even approach her.

"Oscar-kun, go pin her down and kiss her," Meiru said, tugging on Oscar's inky-black yukata.

"You want me to kill myself?"

"It's called shock therapy."

The two of them were hiding behind a corner of the hallway, watching Miledi from a distance.

"I feel like she's calmed down a lot from when we first came here," Oscar said.

"I know, but...I still can't bear to see her like this," Meiru replied, folding her arms. Her boobs threatened to spill out of her sky-blue yukata at any moment. Since coming here, her manner of dress had gotten sloppier and more revealing, causing the residents of this mansion endless headaches.

"I think Miledi just needs some time to reflect. We all do, really," Oscar added, leaning back against the wall and looking up.

"I guess we just have to wait for now, then," Meiru replied gently.

Though Oscar's glasses hid his expression, Meiru could tell he was in a similar state to Miledi. Both of them were desperately trying to find a way to narrow the gap in strength between them and Ehit, but they couldn't think of anything. They were burning with impatience and anxiety, but as Meiru had said, all they could really do was wait.

The seven ancient magic users still hadn't recovered from that strange sense of exhaustion that had washed over them after destroying Ehit's pillar, and the two hundred-odd prisoners that they'd rescued needed time to rest and recover as well. Moreover, they needed to stay close to the Melusine—which had become the Liberators' new temporary headquarters—to keep track of all of their comrades who were still on the run and help them if need be. More than anything, though, staying here was the fastest way to find a solution to their problem.

"The Dragon Kingdom has a long and storied history. I'm sure we'll be able to find some clues on how to defeat Ehit here."

In fact, the main reason the dragonmen had come to the Liberators' aid, and why they were staying here in the Dragon Kingdom, was because they wanted all the information Miledi and the others had gleaned about Ehit from their decisive battle. Of course, they also wanted to protect Miledi and her comrades, since the ancient magic users had the best chance of defeating Ehit that the

dragonmen had seen in their kingdom's thousand-year history. The Dragon Kingdom had even been willing to sacrifice all of its warriors to help Miledi and the others escape if it came down to it. While Miledi and the others were glad for the assistance, the special treatment they had received didn't sit well with them. Still, they'd managed to safely escape from the apostles, so at the very least, they wouldn't have to worry about the Dragon Kingdom crumbling because of them.

At any rate, the kingdom's scholars were now poring over their nation's ancient texts to see if they could learn anything new with the knowledge Miledi had given them about Ehit. Meanwhile, Miledi and the others got to relax in the Dragon General's mansion. Unfortunately, they weren't managing to relax much, as they were simultaneously filled with a burning desire to act and the despondence that came with knowing they'd been thoroughly outmatched.

"If things were going to come to this regardless, we should have contacted the dragonmen before the decisive battle," Meiru said.

"You're right, but with the execution coming up, we simply didn't have time," Oscar replied.

The Dragon Kingdom was surrounded on all sides by the northern mountains and was hundreds of kilometers away from civilization. Moreover, it was well-hidden, and only Miledi—who'd visited once before—knew its exact location.

In the days leading up to the decisive battle, Miledi and the others had been busy setting up the Skynets, upgrading their equipment, preparing escape routes, and holding backroom meetings with the leaders of the various nations. There had been a mountain of tasks to accomplish, and not nearly enough time.

"I suppose that's fair," Meiru said with a shrug of her shoulders.

"I think I'll go bring some refreshments to the scholars. I'm sure they'll be happy to be served by a beautiful woman like me."

"Please dress properly before you go. If you go in that outfit, you'll just stress them out even more. I know these clothes were gifts, but that doesn't mean you can alter them however you please. The yukata you're wearing now is basically as revealing as underwear in this culture. Going out dressed like that in this city just makes you a pervert, Meiru."

"How rude!" Meiru responded with a kick that flashed her panties, which only further proved Oscar's point.

"What are you two doing?" Naiz asked, rounding the far corner and walking down the hallway toward them. He was wearing his ivory-white yukata perfectly, like a native.

Meiru jerked her chin over at Miledi, and Naiz nodded in understanding after taking one look at her.

“Oscar, why don’t you go say something to her? Cheering girls up is your specialty, isn’t it?”

“What do you guys think I am?”

“A fake gentleman and a womanizer,” Naiz and Meiru said in unison.

“Fuck you.”

Oscar adjusted his glasses and hastily tried to change the topic.

“How’re things looking?”

“We got a message from Sim today. The beastmen warriors managed to regroup.”

“Have they returned to the forest?”

“Valf, Craid, and about half of the soldiers have. Sui’s in Entris, while Sim and Nirke are hiding with the remaining warriors in our village at the border of Uldea and Odion.”

“Is Sui trying to scout out what the theocracy’s up to?”

“Hopefully. Sim said that she vanished before he knew it.”

“My, are we sure she didn’t just grow tired of working for the Liberators and run away?”

“I wouldn’t put it past her, especially with how resigned Sim looked when he told me that.”

It wouldn’t have been surprising if Sui had hidden herself away from her comrades so they wouldn’t push more work on her.

Oscar, Meiru, and Naiz sighed in unison. Oscar then started counting off with his fingers and said, “So now we know for sure that Badd, Marshal, Chris, and Diene-chan are all safe.”

“Margaretta as well. She and the other Schnee clansmen have made it to Sainttown. We’ve managed to get in touch with about sixty percent of the forces that participated in the decisive battle. Though honestly, I am worried about how the demon army is faring.”

“Yeah, they’d stand out in the northern continent. We’d know if they passed through the Reisen Gorge, but since that’s the main border between the northern and southern continent, the church is probably heavily patrolling the area. They’ll need to move carefully if they want to slip past the guards.”

Salus was coordinating the retreat efforts and checking up on everyone via the massive Skynet installed on the Melusine. Lyutillis was helping him as well. The Skynets had bad reception in this mountainous region, so they needed her evolution magic to boost their output enough to get a proper signal.

Oddly enough, it seemed Ehit and the church hadn’t sent out any pursuit parties against the fleeing Liberators yet.

“Why aren’t they making a move?” Naiz muttered, his expression grim. Meiru and Oscar knew he was referring to the church, so their expressions darkened as well.

“The church’s forces were decimated but...that doesn’t seem like a good enough reason to lie low.”

“Yeah, since now they’re reinforced by an army of apostles.”

“Still, even if Ehit proved his strength, faith in him is wavering. According to Badd, people in the other nations are starting to doubt the church...and some have even ousted the priests.”

“I guess if the apostles start a purge now, the people will stop believing in Ehit completely. They’ll be ruled by fear instead of faith. But wait, does Ehit really care that much about people worshiping him?”

“Maybe he just wants to see if our struggle will entertain him?”

“He did say the decisive battle was a letdown. I wouldn’t put it past him to... Sorry, there’s no point in idle speculation.”

They had no way of knowing Ehit’s true motives, so ruminating on them wouldn’t get them anywhere. All that mattered was that they’d been given some reprieve, and they needed to use that time to learn as much as they could from the Dragon Kingdom’s archives as possible.

The three of them smiled wanly at each other. They then decided that it would be best to leave Miledi alone and hope that the tranquil garden brought her some peace of mind. However, as they turned to leave, someone came barreling down from the other side of the hallway.

“Whoa, Van-chan?!”

“Miledi, sorry, but can you hide me for a sec?!”

Miledi stared at him in surprise as he half-slid his way over to her and dove right into the garden, his indigo-blue yukata completely disheveled. He then ducked under Miledi’s feet and hid in the space below the porch.

At a distance, it looked like he was burying his face into her crotch. Miledi squealed in surprise, and Oscar primed his glasses to blow Vandre to pieces. However, before he could fire off his murderous beam, Meiru smacked the back of his head and Naiz tripped him with a leg sweep. As a result, Oscar fired his beam straight into the ground, opening two holes in the wood.

A second later, another set of footsteps pattered down the hallway from the same direction Vandre had come.

“Well hello there, Miledi-san! What are you doing here?”

“Oh, Nieshika-san.”

A woman who looked to be in her midthirties with pale violet hair and eyes, as well as a lapis-blue kimono, walked over to Miledi. Her name was Nieshika Schnee...and she was the wife of Grice Schnee, the owner of this mansion.

“Umm, I was just admiring your garden,” Miledi said.

“Why, that’s wonderful. Be sure to tell the gardener how much

you like it as well. It will make him very happy. Anyway, relaxing is important.”

Nieshika sat down next to Miledi and smiled warmly at her.

“Umm...”

“He he he...” Nieshika laughed and started patting Miledi on the head. Miledi was at a loss for how to respond to Nieshika’s head pats, which was a rarity for her.

“That yukata really suits you. Would you like me to do up your hair later? I found a hairpin that would be perfect for you. You’re a very refined lady, so I think a more mature haori would also work well.”

“I-It’s fine. I’m happy with the clothes you gave me already.”

“Oh, Miledi-san, there’s no need to be so formal with me. You’ll make this old woman sad.”

“You’re not that old...”

“After you live three hundred years, you can’t exactly call yourself young anymore.”

Miledi felt like a child whenever she was around Nieshika...and it wasn’t just her either, as Oscar and the others felt the same way. They were taking advantage of her hospitality, and she belonged to one of the most important noble families in the Dragon Kingdom, but it was her personality more than anything that made them feel like they just couldn’t say no to her.

Honestly though, it wasn’t just her either, as they felt this way around pretty much all of the dragonmen. When they’d first arrived in the Dragon Kingdom, most of the Liberators and Andikan citizens had been a little scared of the dragonmen. They had grown up hearing stories about how evil they all were, after all. But after spending some time here, they’d come to realize how kind, tolerant, and open-minded the dragonmen were. There was also something about the dragonmen that simply made people respect them.

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude on your alone time.”

“It’s fine, I was just spacing out because I had nothing to do.”

“Really? Still, I’m sorry for droning on. When you get to my age, it’s hard to stop yourself.”

With a smile, Nieshika suddenly raised her hand and... “Hngh!”

“Bwah!”

...drove her fist through the floor, grabbing Vandre and hauling him up.

“Eeeeeek!” Miledi shouted, surprised and more than a little scared.

“How could you be so cruel, Van? Why would you run from your grandmother?”

“I-I wasn’t running...” Vandre muttered weakly. Nieshika was

holding him by the collar, and only half of his body was above the floorboards. He turned to Miledi, pleading for help with his eyes.

“Look at someone when they’re talking to you!”

“O-Okay. Sorry.”

Vandre, who was normally a haughty ball of arrogance, was as meek as a kitten before Nieshika. It was such a rare and precious sight that Miledi didn’t have any desire to help him. She did her best to avoid meeting Vandre’s gaze and simply shot covert glances at him instead. The trio in the hallway was also sneaking surreptitious glances at Vandre.

“Sheesh, all I did was offer to clean your ears out for you.”

“But I’m too old for...”

“There’s no need to be shy, Van. Let your grandmother pamper you.”

Nieshika hauled Vandre the rest of the way up and hugged him. And as she patted his head, he let out a strange noise. Being in Nieshika’s embrace was so comfortable that he almost let himself surrender, but then he saw Miledi grinning at him from the corner of his eye.

“Hngh!”

With an identical grunt to his grandmother’s, he tried to extricate himself from Nieshika’s grasp, but before he knew it, he was resting on her lap. Despite being a master of every martial art, he couldn’t even begin to fathom how she’d managed that. Embarrassed, frustrated, and a little happy all at once, Vandre once again tried to squirm away, but before he could, he heard an exasperated voice call out to them from above.

“Nieshika, what are you doing?”

“Hello, dear. Van’s being shy and rebellious. What should I do?”

“It sure seems like you already know what you want to do, so why even ask?”

“He he he he...”

Grice let out a long sigh. Their savior had ultramarine hair and eyes, and was wearing a yukata that was the same indigo color as Vandre’s. His brow was perpetually furrowed, and he carried himself with all the dignity and pride of a powerful general.

Vandre cast his gaze around, searching for anything that might help him. He wanted to stand, but Nieshika kept holding him down without him even realizing it.

“You have a bad habit of smothering people with affection, you know? Remember how much it annoyed Sariska?”

Nieshika certainly did have that old cat lady vibe.

“Sorry, Van,” Grice said.

“It’s okay...”

Both of them weren't very talkative by nature, so whenever they met, it was kind of awkward. Kind of like a father who was always away on business trips finally getting some time off to see his son, but neither of them knowing what to say.

Grice wasn't trying to be distant, but he also had no idea how to interact with his long-lost grandson, so their exchanges always ended up stilted.

"Oh, come now, dear. I know you're bad with words, but you really do want to talk with Van more, don't you? Why, just last night, I saw you wandering the halls with your prized bottle of aged sake, looking for—"

"Please spare me," Grice said, blushing to the tips of his ears. It was obvious to anyone watching that Grice and Nieshika both treasured Vandre greatly. He was their daughter's cherished son, so of course they loved him. And it clearly wasn't just them either, since the other members of the Schnee family, and even the family's servants, were overjoyed to see Vandre. No one cared that he was a half-breed or that he had the blood of the previous Demon Lord running through his veins. Though honestly, that was precisely why it was hard for Vandre to settle in.

The night they'd arrived at Grice's mansion, Vandre had talked with him and Nieshika for hours. He'd told them about how he'd been born, everything that had happened to him, and even that Sasrika had died because he couldn't control himself. He hadn't hidden a single thing. And that was precisely why Vandre thought he didn't deserve to be accepted by the rest of his family. However, Grice and Nieshika clearly didn't agree.

"Umm, I..."

Before Vandre could get another word in, Grice patted his head and made his grandson look up to see the old dragonman casting a gentle gaze over him.

Feeling totally out of place, Miledi slowly scooted away. Seeing that, Grice remembered what he'd come here for and awkwardly cleared his throat.

"His Majesty has invited you to lunch. Will you join him?" he asked, looking first at Miledi, then at the trio hiding in the hallway.

Vandre followed his gaze and nearly fainted in shock when he realized Oscar, of all people, had seen him resting atop his grandmother's lap.

"It'd be our pleasure," Oscar and the others said, grinning.

Grice led Miledi and the others to the palace for their formal lunch. As they walked through the city's gorgeous streets, the party took in the sights of the capital.

The Dragon Kingdom's capital was situated in a large caldera, and while the surrounding region was nothing but bare rock, the caldera was teeming with vegetation. Numerous streams ran through the city, and all of the buildings were made of wood. Even the largest of them was no more than three stories tall, and the simple architectural style was something the group hadn't seen anywhere else.

The palace, too, was quite unique. It wasn't at all ostentatious, and following the rule of other large buildings in the city, only three stories tall. And yet, the vermilion gates were beautiful despite lacking ornamentation and the rock garden in the courtyard was marvelous. The inner palace also felt majestic, and Miledi and the others felt as though they'd wandered into another world.

As they stepped inside, they awkwardly removed their shoes, following the dragonmen's custom of not wearing footwear indoors. They enjoyed the warmth of the wooden floors underneath their bare feet as they walked down the halls. Or, in Meiru's case, glided like an ice skater. Naiz shook his head in exasperation as he watched her.

After taking a few turns, they reached the banquet hall. The party could hear boisterous voices from the other side of the sliding door.

"I've gotta say, I'm jealous of Grice. None of us have any kids as amazing as his grandson."

Vandre stiffened up upon hearing that.

"Well, if you ask me, Miledi's the best of them!"

Miledi blushed.

"Both of them are only skilled in their respective fields, though. Meanwhile, Oscar has mastered numerous different disciplines."

Oscar let out a strangled noise.

"Come on, who cares about those three? Meiru's the real star of the Liberators. She really does take after Reej. No wonder she's become one of the most—"

Meiru scowled angrily and before anyone could stop her, she kicked the door open and stomped into the room. One of the guards turned in shock, but Meiru ignored him and turned to one of the men who'd been talking—Baharl. She then gave him a terrifying smile, and before he could try to make excuses for himself, she elbowed him in the face, hard.

"Owwwwww! What was that for?!"

"For pretending like you're my dad! Got a problem with that?!"

"I take it back, you're nothing like Reej. She didn't constantly resort to violence like you do."

"Okay, that settles it. Today's the day you die. I'll make you relive all the injuries you've suffered in your life."

"Stop it, you moron!" Oscar shouted, wrapping his wires around Meiru and dragging her away before she killed Baharl.

Miledi hurriedly stepped forward and bowed in apology, saying, "I'm terribly sorry about Meru-nee, Your Majesty."

She was addressing the man at the head of the table. He had dark golden hair and eyes, and looked to be as old as Grice. And though he was thinner than Grice, he carried himself with the bearing of a king. That being said, he wasn't the kind of ruler that demanded subservience from those in his presence. People simply felt overawed upon seeing him, like hikers looking up at a tall mountain and marveling at the majesty of nature.

This man was, of course, the king of the Dragon Kingdom, Tragdi Augis Astlan. He smiled gently at Miledi and replied, "No worries, Lady Miledi."

His voice was as gentle as his expression, and it naturally put people at ease.

"If anything, I'm a little jealous of Baharl. My daughter doesn't even give me the time of day."

"With all due respect, Your Majesty, I am *not* this man's daugh—"

"Meru-nee, stay," Miledi said, turning to Meiru with an even more terrifying smile than the one she'd given Baharl.

"Y-You're scaring me, Miledi-chan," Meiru replied meekly. While Meiru had technically addressed Tragdi by his title, she'd spoken to him like she would anyone else. The pirate queen really didn't kneel to anyone.

Tragdi let out a booming laugh, and Miledi breathed a sigh of relief, glad that he was open-minded enough to not mind Meiru's disrespect.

Everyone took their seats, and Oscar and Miledi gave Karg and Salus respectively somewhat embarrassed glares. Meiru sniffed dismissively and glared at Baharl with a lot more outright hostility. The three old men simply looked away, refusing to meet their children's gazes...and all the while, Tragdi laughed even harder.

"By the way, where is Laus-dono?" he asked, casting his gaze over Miledi and the others. He didn't ask after Lyutillis, since Salus had already told him she'd be a little late.

"He's probably with his family," Miledi replied.

"Hmm... I see."

Laus's family had been among the people that had been on the Melusine when the Liberators had made their escape. They'd been given a mansion on the outskirts of the city, and Laus was still in the middle of hashing things out with them. Or rather, still in the middle of trying to persuade them.

They still hated the Liberators and the dragonmen, and Laus's words didn't seem to be getting through to them. Kaime and Selm at least were willing to take walks with Laus and eat meals with him, but

it was still hard to tell if their minds had actually changed at all.

Naturally, the dragonmen were keeping an eye on Laus's family, and Tragdi knew all the details about Laus's struggles, which was why he looked down sadly.

"We're extremely thankful that you allowed them into the capital, Your Majesty," Miledi said.

"What, you mean two kids and two women who can't fight? I would have to be a heartless monster to refuse them entry," Tragdi answered with a sad smile as the maids started serving lunch.

Kaime and Selm had both been forced to wear artifact bracelets enchanted with Core Seal, so their apostleified strength was sealed away as well. For the moment, they really were just two regular kids.

In an attempt to lighten the mood, Tragdi lifted his goblet and said, "All right, let's eat."

For some time, everyone focused on their meal and all heavy topics were avoided. The food wasn't the kind of lavish fare that was served at nobles' parties on the mainland. But while it was simple, it tasted delicious and warmed everyone to the core. Both the food and the entire composition of the capital spoke volumes about the dragonmen's character.

As they ate, Miledi occasionally snuck glances at Tragdi. She had come to the Dragon Kingdom once before, three years ago, though back then, it had been by pure coincidence. She'd been searching for somewhere to build a new village for the Liberators and had coincidentally passed over the region the dragonmen patrolled. They'd been quite surprised to discover a human girl who had mastered the skies better than them. Then, after a few twists and turns, Miledi and the dragonmen had become friends, and she'd been invited to the palace.

Back then, it felt like she'd walked into a fairy tale. Dragonmen had been a race from legends, and the church had of course painted them as pure evil. But of course, Miledi had quickly learned that they were nothing like what the church said, and so, she inevitably invited them to join the Liberators. However, they refused, stating that the Liberators weren't yet strong enough to convince the Dragon Kingdom to make their move. Moreover, they'd said, "Besides, to the world, we're the 'evil' dragonmen."

While Miledi reminisced about the past, Salus and Tragdi chatted amicably with each other, ironically about the exact topic that Miledi was reminiscing about.

"Oh, yes. I heard from Miledi that at the time, you refused our invitation because we lacked strength."

Dragonmen occupied a slightly different niche in the church's religious canon than the similarly supposedly evil demons. They

weren't a concrete foe that needed to be defeated, nor did any of the human kingdoms have any real history with them. In a way, they were a symbol of more abstract evil. Had they joined forces with Miledi in the past, everyone would have likely denounced her ideals, saying, "See, she's joined forces with those wicked dragonmen, the root of all evil!"

If they'd joined forces with her back in the day, Miledi would have lost her chance to convey her desires to everyone. But now that the world's faith in Ehit was wavering, things were different.

"Were we not interested in rethinking that alliance, we would not have invited you here," Tragdi admitted to Salus. "Your resolve is admirable, and your drive for revolution worthy of respect."

Tragdi had said the exact same thing to Miledi three years ago, and while he'd meant it back then too, this time those words weren't a dismissal.

"Your Majesty...thank you so much," Miledi replied with a smile. Oscar and the others smiled as well, while Salus and the old men breathed sighs of relief.

"The Liberators are the world's only hope of freeing the people from Ehit's tyrannical rule."

Smiling in return, Tragdi said, "Incidentally, you don't need to worry about the fact that you said, 'I'll make you my pet!' the first time we met anymore."

Everyone at the table spit out their drinks. No one had known about that embarrassing moment in Miledi's past.

"M-Miledi?! Did you really say that?!"

"H-H-H-Hang on, Van-chan! I've got a good explanation!"

"Miledi, I'm not sure we can be friends anymore..."

"O-kun?! Not you too!"

"Hey, Miledi-chan. Didn't you *just* scold me for being rude to the king? And now this?"

"What kind of horrible person would say something like that?"

"Meru-nee, Nacchan, listen to meeeeeee!" Miledi shouted, and the sadistic dragon king watched the resulting chaos with a grin.

Grice sighed and said, "Your Majesty, please don't tease them too much."

"I'm just having a little fun. Besides, Miledi's been so subdued since she arrived. Wouldn't you agree she's much better like this? Besides, it's not like I lied about anything."

"She only said that because you met her in your transformed state to keep the existence of dragonmen a secret and acted like a mindless monster the whole time."

"Ho ho, I see now. Thank goodness, I was worried our Miledi had a secret fetish she'd been hiding from everyone," Salus said with a

sigh of relief.

Just then, the door that Meiru had kicked open, which had only just been repaired, was once again roughly flung open. A woman with the same color hair and eyes as Tragdi walked through it. She had waist-length hair and a sharp gaze that she leveled at Miledi and the others.

“How long are you guys planning to stay here?” she asked in a cold voice.

Tragdi gave her a stern look and said, “Shival, there’s no need to be rude. Apologize.”

“I’m sorry, father, but you seemed to be having a grand old time in here, and I think if you have time to be fooling around, you should get out and start your revolution already. The longer you stay here, the more likely it is that our nation gets caught up in this war.”

Shival spoke to Tragdi without any respect, which wasn’t too surprising, since she was his daughter.

Tragdi shook his head and replied, “Everyone knows how much you care about our people...and honestly, I’m glad you’re putting them first as well. However, that exclusionary stance is not something I can approve of as a dragonman. How many times have I told you now?”

“Says the man ruling over a nation that’s hiding away from everyone else.”

“We’re only hiding here to avoid plunging the continent into chaos. Surely you must see that.”

“Well, right now, you’re harboring the group that just plunged the world into chaos.”

“Shival,” Tragdi muttered, narrowing his eyes dangerously as the air crackled with tension.

Before an argument could break out, Miledi hurriedly said, “I’m sorry we were so noisy. As soon as your scholars are done investigating the archives, we’ll leave, so—”

“I’ve been worried this might happen since you showed up three years ago,” Shival said as she glared angrily at Miledi.

“Huh?”

“If your visit here brings tragedy to our nation, I’ll make you pay dearly!”

“That’s enough! Get out!” Tragdi shouted.

“Father, why won’t you understand?! What do some lofty ideals matter now?! Aren’t the lives of our brethren more important?!”

It was obvious Shival and Tragdi had had this argument countless times already, enough times even that there was no need to rehash it in front of guests.

Tragdi let out a long sigh and said, “I’m sorry, Grice, but can you escort her out?”

“Of course. Come on, Princess.”

“I don’t need an escort!” Shival said, glaring at Tragdi through teary eyes. She then turned and stalked off. Grice bowed to the table, then walked out behind her.

“I’m sorry you had to see that. I know this is going to sound like an excuse, but...she wasn’t always like this. It was the death of her mother that changed her.”

Tragdi gave a simple explanation of what had happened. Apparently, humans had killed his wife, Shival’s mother. Humans that the dragonmen had rescued from certain death, no less. It had been the dragonmen’s lofty ideals that had invited this danger into their home, and young Shival’s curiosity that had been the trigger for the tragedy. Ever since, Shival had become an extremist who was willing to do anything to protect the lives of her brethren...and only her brethren.

The pain in Tragdi’s voice as he recounted the tale made it clear that he felt as though he’d failed as a husband and a father, not just as a king.

“Your Majesty...” Miledi said in a gentle voice, and Tragdi smiled wanly at her.

“Onee-samaaaaaa! Your beloved Lyu has finally arrived! Please, step on me!”

Just then, Lyutillis burst into the room, her perverted nature on full display. Everyone else froze, while Lyutillis stood there, her arms raised high.

“I-I simply wanted to be punished for arriving late...” Lyutillis said, trailing off.

“Can you believe she’s the ruler of a nation just like you, King Tragdi?” Oscar asked in a disbelieving voice.

Fortunately, Lyutillis’s timely arrival helped dispel the somber mood that had been building up in the room. Lyutillis then joined everyone at the dining table and Tragdi watched in disgust as she moaned in pleasure upon experiencing Meiru’s “punishments.”

“Your Majesty, I’m sorry for interrupting your meal, but this is urgent!” one of the scholars shouted, running into the room a half an hour or so after Lyutillis had arrived.

Miledi and the others exchanged glances, then rose to their feet.

Everyone made their way over to a room in the corner of the palace.

“The ability to turn your will into magic?” Miledi asked in a confused voice. Oscar and the others looked just as lost.

Tragdi, who’d also heard the full report from the scholar, nodded and said, “Do you remember that rainbow barrier that protected the

pillar in the cathedral? Didn't Lyutillis-dono say that she sensed a will from that barrier? And once you finally succeeded in destroying it, weren't you all more exhausted than you should have been?"

After cross-referencing the information Miledi had given the dragonmen with all the archives in their library, the scholars had gleaned something from a fairy tale of all things. The fairy tale was a cliched one about a hero defeating the Demon Lord, but it was ancient enough to be from the age of the gods. The hero in that tale turned his unrelenting desire to protect one specific woman into power, then used that power to fight the Demon Lord.

"The description of the barrier the hero creates in that fairy tale is strikingly similar to the one you destroyed. And the story states that it was the hero's unbending *will* that gave birth to that barrier."

"But, Your Majesty, isn't that just some made-up form of magic to make the story seem more exciting?" Laus, who'd come to join everyone else upon hearing that there was an urgent report, asked.

Stories often showed their protagonists gaining fantastical powers to fight against evil.

Tragdi nodded in agreement and answered, "It's true that this particular story is a simple fairy tale, hence why we paid it no heed at first either."

The fairy tale didn't even mention Ehit anywhere, though it did mention a goddess and a sacred tree.

"A goddess? Not Ehit?" Oscar muttered, almost to himself.

However, Tragdi heard him and replied, "Correct, Ehit's name is nowhere to be found. Granted, while we all refer to Ehit as a he, his gender has never been made clear, so perhaps the goddess is Ehit."

Regardless, that wasn't what Tragdi had found interesting about this particular tale.

"More importantly, read the hero's words as he casts the barrier. 'Nothing shall despoil this sanctuary.'"

"Those are the same words you felt from the barrier, right, Lyu?"

"Yes, it was a thought so strong it sent shivers down my spine."

Lyutillis shivered again simply from recalling it, and Tragdi cast his gaze over the others.

"The exhaustion you felt after destroying that barrier was more than just the tiredness one feels after using up most of their mana, wasn't it?"

"Well..." Miledi trailed off, carefully choosing her words. She then looked at Oscar and the others and continued, "At that moment, I had this thought. It wasn't just my mana or Lyu's evolution magic that was powering me. The knowledge that everyone was with me, that I wasn't alone, that we were all here fighting for the same future, gave me strength. I felt like we were more united than ever before."

Miledi blushed a little after saying that.

"I know exactly what you mean. I think this is what people mean when they say their hearts are one," Meiru said.

"Yes, I felt it too," Lyutillis said. "This overwhelming belief that us seven could accomplish anything if we put our minds to it."

"Me too. Even though we didn't understand that barrier, I knew for sure that we could break it," Naiz added.

"Yes, exactly. Our respective desires for liberation overlapped in that moment," Laus stated.

"Hang on, are you suggesting we used magic from a fairy tale?" Vandre asked in disbelief.

Oscar adjusted his glasses, let out a long sigh, and answered, "All of this is true, but to answer your question, Your Majesty, being drained of our mana wouldn't be enough to explain the exhaustion we felt, no. When the barrier was finally destroyed, I felt like my willpower had been sapped away. You all felt it too, right?"

Miledi and the others lapsed into thought, chewing over Oscar's words.

Salus and the others listened quietly, not wanting to disturb them.

"There's no point in worrying about it."

"Yeah, what matters is that we have a new lead, so all that's left is to see where it leads us."

"Your Majesty. What happens to the hero in the story after that?" Baharl asked.

Tragdi shook his head and replied, "I don't know. This particular book ends with the hero going on a journey to chase after the Demon Lord."

The prevailing interpretation was that after creating a haven for his girlfriend that the Demon Lord couldn't break, the hero decides to finish the Demon Lord off once and for all.

"Should we return to the Pale Forest?" Lyutillis suggested. The forest had its own sacred tree and was considered a 'sanctuary' for the beastmen. Lyutillis was confident she knew all there was to know about the forest, but she also couldn't think of anywhere else to investigate.

Before Miledi and the others could say anything though, Tragdi shook his head and said, "No, you should make your way to the southwestern edge of the continent, to the Azure Lands."

Oscar and the others exchanged confused looks, but then Miledi looked up in realization and stated, "You want us to visit the vampire nation."

"Correct. They are the only race with a history more ancient than ours."

Dragonmen had been persecuted multiple times in the past, in the

age before they closed off their borders and hid away from the world. Every time that had happened, they'd lost much of their literature and oral history. However, the vampires had kept themselves closed off from the world from the very start. Thus, none of their history had been lost to purges, or so Tragdi claimed.

"However, while I'm sure you know this..." Tragdi trailed off. The vampires had kept themselves so closed off that they didn't allow any other race into their borders. It was likely that Miledi and the others would be turned away immediately.

"Hmm, I'm sure I'll be able to persuade them to at least talk to us," Meiru said, and for a moment, everyone stared at her in confusion.

"Have you all forgotten? I'm half-vampire."

"Oh yeah!" Miledi, Oscar, Naiz, and Vandred said, blinking in surprise.

"Wait, really?! Why didn't you tell me?!"

"Wait, so Reej's first man was a vampire?!"

Lyutillis was excited about learning more about her beloved Onee-sama, while Baharl ground his teeth upon discovering who Reej's first love had been.

Meiru ignored Lyutillis and pointed a finger at Baharl. With a shit-eating grin, she said, "Yeah, and mom really loved dad, so take that!"

"Y-You little brat!" Baharl shouted. Luckily, Karg gently patted his shoulder before he could blow a gasket.

"B-But, Meru-nee, wasn't your dad a noble? And didn't Reej-san have to hide away in Andika because it would've been bad if word got out that she had a child with him? Are you sure it's a good idea to use your heritage to try to get us an audience?" Miledi asked in a worried voice.

"That's exactly why it's a good idea. It's harder to ignore someone who's a problem than someone who doesn't matter at all. He he he..."

"You really are a lawless pirate," Salus said, prompting Baharl to round on him. But before he could say anything, Meiru glared at him to shut up.

"Hmm, that is an unexpected but fortuitous connection. So, what will you do, leader of the Liberators?" Tragdi asked, turning to Miledi.

Miledi shot Meiru a worried look, but she simply patted her fearless leader's head reassuringly. Oscar and the others looked like they were on board as well. And so, after seeing their resolve, Miledi made her decision.

"We'll go. It's time to pay a visit to Tortus's oldest country, Dastia."

That evening, Tragdi and the other dragonmen gathered at the

capital's central plaza to see Miledi off. Salus and a number of the other Liberators would be staying in the Dragon Kingdom and using it as a temporary base of operations, so they were also there to see Miledi and her comrades before they left.

"I can't believe you're leaving so soon, Van," Nieshika said, her shoulders slumping.

"Yeah...I'm sorry."

Vandre couldn't think of what else to say, but as he waffled for the right words, he felt a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"Be sure to return to us," Grice said in a gentle voice. However, Vandre still couldn't bring himself to accept his kindness.

"Umm...I already have a..."

Vandre didn't feel like a real Schnee, since he'd never met the rest of his family and had only inherited the name from his mother. To him, his true home was with Margaretta and the others.

"Don't be stupid," Grice said, tightening his grip on Vandre's shoulder until it hurt.

"Your family is our family. Next time, bring them all here with you."

Grice's expression was so warm, so reassuring, that Vandre felt himself being pulled in.

"Van, you don't have to feel guilty about what happened to Sasrika," Nieshika stated as she took Vandre's hand in hers. "She left to see the world of her own accord. She wanted to be the one to chronicle the state of the world for our people. She chose to have you, raise you, and start a family outside of our nation...all of her own free will. Did you ever feel she'd lost her pride?"

Vandre quietly shook his head and replied, "Mom always held fast to her ideals. She never once lost sight of what it meant to be a dragonman."

Grice and Nieshika closed their eyes, carving Vandre's words into their hearts.

"Then hold your head high. Live the life you believe is right. That's the best way to prove that Sasrika Schnee's sacrifice was not in vain," Grice said.

"We're proud of you both. Sasrika managed to raise you into such a splendid boy despite the harsh circumstances she was in, so don't be too hard on yourself."

Vandre could feel the tears welling up in his eyes, but he didn't want to be a blubbering mess during his departure, so he held them in and met his grandparents' gazes.

"I'll be going, but I promise I'll return to you...with the rest of my family. See you soon...grandfather, grandmother."

That was the first time Vandre had called them that. Grice and

Nieshika beamed at him upon hearing those words.

“Your Highness, I’m sorry I have to ask you this, but please look after my family in my absence,” Laus said, turning to Tragdi.

“Fear not, Laus-dono. I swear on my name as the dragon king that they shall come to no harm. And I believe the day will come where they will understand your actions.”

“You have my everlasting gratitude.”

Laus and Tragdi exchanged a firm handshake. Kaime and the others would be staying here, and Sharm and Reinheit would be arriving in a few days to keep an eye on them.

“All right, we’ll be heading off, then, Your Majesty. Thanks a lot for your assistance,” Miledi said.

“Miledi, I pray that you and your comrades’ futures are filled with light,” Tragdi replied, and the two of them nodded to each other.

Naiz then opened a portal and Miledi and the others took their next steps toward their goal, hoping to grasp a solution they weren’t sure existed.

Chapter III: The Vampire Nation and Forgotten Magic

Miledi and the others set up camp for the night in the mountainous region in the north of the demon empire.

The land of vampires, the Dastia Kingdom, was in an almost perfectly diagonal straight line from the Dragon Kingdom. The Dragon Kingdom was roughly on the northeastern edge of the continent, while Dastia was on the southwestern tip.

It was a massive distance to cover, and honestly, Miledi would have preferred to travel in a straight line to make the trip shorter. However, they'd taken a detour due south to meet with some people.

As the party was sitting around the campfire, listening to the sounds of nature and drinking their after-dinner tea, Laus suddenly looked up. The people they'd been waiting for were almost there.

Five minutes later, two black-clad figures emerged from behind a mossy boulder.

"Are we late?"

Both figures looked to be in their early twenties, and they each had black hair. One had frizzy hair, while the other's was slicked back. They both moved stealthily in the dark, but their porcelain white skin and crimson eyes made them stand out more than they otherwise would have.

"No, we just got here ourselves," Oscar replied, transmuting two chairs out of a nearby boulder for the newcomers.

"I thought we'd manage to beat you guys here."

"I can't believe you covered the distance from the northern mountain range to here so quickly..."

As the two of them sat down, Naiz offered them the leftovers of the group's dinner, but they shook their heads and politely refused.

They looked a little nervous, so Miledi gently asked, "Are you two doing okay?"

"I know it's not my place to say, but don't push yourselves too hard. Laus may have healed your souls, but the experiments you endured in the Demon Lord's castle were far beyond what mere healing can fix," Vandre added in an apologetic tone.

The two of them were the very same vampire chimeras that had been experimented on to serve as the mind-controlled Rasul's anti-ancient magic shock troops. The man with swept-back hair was the

blademaster, Morgan Curtis, while his frizzy-haired fellow was the close-ranged martial artist, Nevrai Fist.

When Miledi had told everyone that they'd be going to Dastia through the Skynets, the two of them had volunteered to leave the safety of Sainttown, where they'd been recuperating, and tag along. Dastia was their homeland, so it made sense for them to return, and Miledi was grateful to have natives coming along. However, due to the horrifying experiments they'd been subjected to, and the fact that their wills had been bound for so many years, they were still recuperating mentally.

"We appreciate the concern, but we're fine. Besides, we must repay our debt to the Liberators," Morgan said.

"Though being up and about is taking more of a toll than I thought," Nevrai added with a slight smile.

"Still, it's because of my metamorphosis magic that you two are...you know..."

Vandre was, of course, referring to their current forms, which he thought might make it difficult for them to return home.

"What Vandre wants to ask is if you'll be welcome back home now that your bodies have been fused with demons and monsters to absorb their unique traits," Laus said, cutting to the chase.

"We have heard that Dastia is an insular country that places a great deal of importance on lineage," Lyutillis added, somewhat more diplomatically.

Indeed, back when all of the test subjects had been freed, Miledi had offered to take the two of them back home to Dastia, and they'd told her exactly what Laus and Lyutillis were saying now.

Vandre narrowed his eyes worriedly, but to his surprise, Morgan and Nevrai awkwardly looked away.

"I'm sorry, but when we told you that, it was partially a lie."

Miledi blinked in surprise and asked, "A lie? But why?"

"It's not true that we can't return home. Also..."

"We lied about being too traumatized to fight anymore."

In truth, Miledi and the others had been a bit wary of the vampire duo. After all, they could obstruct and neutralize gravity, spatial, restoration, and spirit magic. And on top of that, they had the physical strength of beastmen and the mana aptitude of demons, as well as the ability to quasi-limit break by taking advantage of their natural vampire super healing. Had they been vampire supremacists that saw other races as nothing more than food, it was entirely possible that they would have attacked the villagers once they'd been healed, which was why Miledi and the others had checked in on them every time they'd gone near the village they were resting in.

Of course, the vampires had realized the Liberators were wary of

them, so one day when Miledi had come, they'd told her, "We're not so shameless as to turn our fangs against our saviors. If you want us to leave, we will. But we have no home to return to, and we're too traumatized to fight again. So, if possible, we'd like to remain here."

They had indeed looked as mentally exhausted as they'd sounded, and their fear of sudden noises had seemed truly genuine. However, with time and Corrin's exceptional nursing abilities, they'd eventually started opening up to the villagers. In fact, by the time the war in the Pale Forest had begun, Miledi and the others had trusted them enough to leave them for months at a time unsupervised.

Then, after Laus had joined the group, he'd helped speed up their recovery with his spirit magic. But they still hadn't seemed terribly interested in returning to their homeland and wanted to remain in this peaceful village away from all the fighting. More than anything, though—

"W-Wait, don't tell me you were lying when you called Corrin a saint too?!" Oscar exclaimed.

"Absolutely not. That girl truly is a saint, there's no doubt about that."

"In fact, leaving her was the hardest decision we've ever made. Oh no. Now that I'm remembering her, I'm getting saint withdrawal symptoms."

They revered Corrin as much as anyone else in Sainttown.

"That girl truly is terrifying. She even managed to bewitch my son," Laus said with a shiver.

"Don't call her terrifying, she's a saint!" the two vampires and Vandre said in unison. The girls gave the three of them sad looks.

Blushing a little, Morgan cleared his throat and said, "Anyway, we are actually in good enough shape to fight again, and we also know people back home who would take us in."

"I assume you have a reason you didn't want to return, then?" Miledi asked.

Nevrai nodded and explained, "We were tasked with a certain mission when we left our nation three years ago. There was someone we needed to find, and we knew it might take ages before we could return home. Though unfortunately, we were attacked by the demon army almost immediately after leaving our borders."

"Hmm? Who were you looking for?"

Nevrai turned to Meiru. His crimson eyes looked strikingly similar to Meiru's own, so when they saw the resemblance, Oscar and the others gasped.

"Hm? You mean me?" Meiru asked.

"Yes. Or so we assume, anyway."

"You're not sure?"

“The only information we were provided was that she was around twenty years old and possessed the traits of both a dagon and a vampire.”

“Also, that she should be able to use magic. Most likely recovery magic, considering her lineage. Those were the characteristics we were told to look for.”

Meiru certainly did fit all of those criteria. Morgan and Nevrai were talking more formally now that they were addressing Meiru.

“All I heard from my mom was that my dad was a noble of high standing. Was he the one who asked you two to look for me?”

“No, it was our liege who ordered the search...not our king.”

Meiru and the others’ jaws dropped. Morgan had just unloaded a bombshell on them.

“My dad is the king of Dastia?”

“If what our liege suspects is true, then yes. We serve the crown prince, Alfard II Dastia.”

“At any rate, if his guess is correct, then you are our king, Alesand II Dastia’s daughter...and a member of the royal family.”

For a while, no one said anything. But eventually, Oscar turned to Naiz and asked in a hesitant voice, “Naiz, you aren’t the long-lost scion of the Sharod family or anything, are you?”

“Where’d that come from? I already told you I’m from a remote village, remember?”

“You’re my only friend!”

“Seriously, what’s gotten into you?!”

Oscar was just feeling a little alienated. His comrades included the Demon Lord’s younger brother, the queen of the Haltina Republic, the head of the most notable noble family in the theocracy, and the former heir of the empire’s most distinguished family. And now, it had been revealed that Meiru was also royalty.

He and Naiz were the only commoners left.

“Naiz, Meiru may have betrayed me, but our bond is everlasting.”

“I feel like I should be happy about that, but for some reason, I’m not.”

“How mean,” Meiru said, entering the conversation. “I didn’t realize you cared so much about status, Oscar-kun.”

“I-It doesn’t matter whether you’re a commoner or a noble, O-kun! Besides, you’re the older brother of a saint!”

“...I’m sorry, Naiz,” Oscar said after a pause.

“Why are you apologizing? Depending on your answer, I may have to smash those glasses of yours.”

Morgan and Nevrai looked taken aback. They’d been having a serious discussion, but then Miledi and the others had suddenly started goofing off.

Realizing that he needed to get everyone back on track, Laus piped up, saying, "So tell us, why exactly is the crown prince searching for Meiru?"

"He didn't say. Besides, he wasn't even sure that Meiru truly existed."

"We have our suspicions, though. That was actually why we stayed behind at your village."

"Let me guess? He didn't want some half-breed mongrel sully the royal family's name, so he wanted you to assassinate me?"

"The prince is not that sort of man!" Morgan shouted loud enough that his voice echoed through the valley.

Meiru shrugged in apology, then replied, "Sorry. It's not like I hold a grudge against my dad or anything, but most people wouldn't want to admit I'm part of their family, so I just figured it was the same with him."

"I'm sorry as well for raising my voice," Morgan said, awkwardly scratching his head.

"It's fine. Also, you don't have to act so polite around me. I'm not part of the Dastian royal family. I'm Meiru Melusine, the head of the Melusine pirate crew."

Morgan and Nevrai exchanged glances, then relaxed their postures. After that, they explained that around three years ago, Alesand suddenly fell ill and decided to name a successor in case he didn't survive. That successor was their master, Alfard. However, Alfard wasn't Alesand's oldest son. Alfard actually had an older brother, Sveit. Moreover, Alfard was an eccentric and a layabout, so everyone was shocked that Alesand had chosen him. Even Alfard himself thought his older brother was more fit for the role, so he'd tried to convince Alesand to name Sveit the successor. But for whatever reason, Alesand refused to budge.

Feeling an enormous amount of pressure, Alfard had gone to consult with his two best friends and confidants, Morgan and Nevrai. He'd told the two of them that his father may have sired an illegitimate child with a commoner he'd come to love before taking the throne. He'd then tasked them to find her before he was forced to ascend the throne himself.

"Wait, don't tell me..." Meiru trailed off with an annoyed frown.

Morgan nodded in response and said, "He never said it outright, but we suspect he wants you to take the throne instead of him."

"He's said time and time again that he doesn't want to be king. I don't know how he learned of his father's actions before taking the throne, but he probably thinks if the daughter his father had with his lover appeared, he might change his mind about who will succeed him."

The majority of vampires really did care about blood purity, like Morgan and Nevrai had said before. They put a lot of stock in the lineage that they could trace back for generations. If word got out that Alesand had a mixed-blood bastard child, it would cause an uproar, which was why Morgan and Nevrai had wanted to see what kind of person Meiru was before bringing her back, especially since they had the perfect excuse to stay close to her as she'd ended up saving them. By staying in the Liberators' village, they'd be able to interact with Meiru themselves, as well as hear all about her deeds and what other people thought of her. Moreover, they wouldn't have to expose their identities to the world at large, which would help protect their homeland from prying eyes. That was why they'd stayed as long as they had.

"Your mom must have left to protect you, Meru-nee," Miledi said with a frown.

"Miledi-chan?"

Miledi looked down into her teacup, scowling even harder.

"People of royal blood really are selfish," she muttered.

"Well, this is merely speculation on our part," Morgan said hurriedly. However, Miledi's expression didn't change.

Smiling gently, Meiru sidled over to Miledi, hugged her, and started patting her head.

"Waaah, wait! You're gonna make me spill my tea!"

"Hey, that's not fair, Onee-sama! I want to pamper Miledi-chan too!" Lyutillis declared, pushing Oscar away and grabbing onto Miledi from the other side.

Squished between two pairs of massive boobs, Miledi shouted, "Y-You wanna fight?! Quit rubbing it in!"

Laus chuckled as he watched the three of them, then said, "Still, it's a plus for us that we have a connection to the royal family."

"That's true. Regardless of what they might want, we can take advantage of this connection to accomplish our own goals."

"You'll need to be wary of Prince Sveit and the purist faction, though. If our master tries to push for a half-breed to take the throne, they won't just sit idly by."

"I'm sure she'll be fine," Laus replied. "She's the pirate queen who tried to conquer a city of outlaws by force, remember? If anything, I'm more worried Meiru might take advantage of her status as royalty to line her own pockets."

"Good point," Oscar, Naiz, and Vandre said in unison. The three girls glared at them.

"R-Regardless, we can at least guide you through the Azure Lands," Morgan said. "We also plan to secretly send a report to His Highness before we enter Dastia, if that's all right."

“Though it’s been three years, so who knows if our method of contacting him will still work,” Nevrai added.

Miledi escaped the suffocating embrace of Meiru and Lyutillis, nodded, and replied, “Yeah, that’s fine. I’m sorry for doubting you guys earlier. But hey, it looks like our goals align, so hopefully, this’ll work out well for all of us!”

“Yes, thank you for letting us accompany you.”

“God is an enemy of us vampires as well, so I’m sure our master won’t get in your way. He’s not that foolish.”

Miledi and the others could tell just how much Morgan and Nevrai respected their master, which reassured them a little.

A few days later, the party finally arrived at the southwestern tip of the continent.

Dastia’s capital was filled with greenery, and many streams cut through the city streets. Those streams spilled over terraced blocks of earth, creating a series of waterfalls that gave birth to a rainbow bridge. Beautiful forest-covered mountains also towered in the distance behind the city.

No one in the outside world would ever have believed that such a beautiful city could be the capital of the wicked vampires, much less that it sat in the center of the Azure Lands—the fog-covered region that was known to be cracked and barren.

The elegant buildings were all made of gray limestone, as was the palace situated atop the tallest hill in the city. And standing atop the palace’s terrace was a noblewoman wearing a beautiful crimson dress. She had wavy blonde hair, crimson eyes, and exuded sex appeal from every pore. Though she was looking down into the city, it wasn’t the streets that were reflected in her faintly glowing eyes.

“I could just turn them away, but...” she mumbled with a tired sigh. Her gaze was focused on the rivers and springs surrounded by fog, as well as the semi-submerged forest that stuck out like a sore thumb in the otherwise barren Azure Lands.

The woman was staring at a section of the Azure Lands over five hundred kilometers away. Her special magic—Familiar Contract—allowed her to share the senses of monsters and animals she’d bonded to, and she was currently looking through the eyes of one of her birds that she’d stationed in the swamp. She could even talk through that bird, though she could only say a few stilted words.

The Azure Lands were Dastia’s first line of defense against intruders. Some bottomless swamps and geysers spit out poison gas, and the terrain was difficult with poor visibility. The rivers split off and flowed in all different directions, making navigation nigh impossible as well, and the forest was home to many dangerous

monsters. Moreover, the forest was quite vast. A good two hundred kilometers wide. Plus, to top it all off, even if someone did manage to make it through the forest, it ended in a steep cliff, which was patrolled by Dastia's border guard. There was also the royal family's heirloom artifact that protected Dastia's borders.

Usually, whenever this noblewoman got a report that intruders had been spotted, she just let the border patrol handle things. And yet, something felt off about these particular intruders, so she felt compelled to personally keep an eye on them. After all, it was possible these newcomers had something to do with the news her spy—who was situated in the demon empire city closest to Dastia—had brought back two days ago.

Her intuition was soon proven correct. When she got a better look at one of the intruders who was fighting the border guards, she gasped. The return of two of her countrymen was a surprise, sure, especially since they'd gone missing a few years ago and had seemingly come back much stronger. However, that wasn't what had caught her attention. It wasn't even the appearance of the ancient magic users, as she'd heard reports about them too. No, it was those crimson eyes that were the most shocking of all.

"S-Stop fighting immediately!" she shouted, and the maids waiting inside her room looked at her in surprise.

"I command you in the name of Anya Il Dastia, cease fighting immediately!"

The combatants looked shaken as well as they heard her speaking through the bird.

"Bring that woman— No, bring that entire group to the fortress."

Realizing that she'd let her ladylike demeanor slip, the woman took a deep breath and steadied herself.

Confused, the guards nevertheless complied.

Meanwhile, Dastia's queen brought her hands to her chest and closed her eyes, conflicted feelings warring within her. After a while, she opened them once more and turned on her heel, looking every bit as regal as a queen should as she left to go visit the daughter of the woman her husband had truly loved.

Two women were staring silently at each other within the fortress atop the cliff at the end of the forest. Meiru and Queen Anya. Five minutes had passed since they'd started staring.

Miledi and the others had been surprised when the guards had suddenly been ordered to stop fighting, and then even more surprised when they'd been led to a fortress and had sat around waiting for half a day before the queen of Dastia herself came to visit, especially since she'd come with no guards and had ridden a giant black eagle over. It

was around three hundred kilometers from the palace to this fortress, meaning she'd pushed her eagle pretty hard to get here as fast as she did.

Normally, royalty would never travel via such inelegant means. Anya appearing so suddenly had been such a shock to the soldiers at the fortress that they'd forgotten to bow to her. And then, she'd pushed her way past all of them despite their protests to the room where Meiru was.

That brought them to the present, where the two of them were staring at each other. Miledi and the others thought the queen had come because she'd discovered they were all ancient magic users, so they were a bit taken aback by Anya's extreme interest in Meiru.

Eventually, Meiru broke the awkward silence.

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Meiru Melusine. I assume you know about my heritage?"

The soldiers in the room bristled. No one was allowed to speak so casually to their queen like that. However, Anya didn't seem bothered by Meiru's tone at all, and she looked deeply into her eyes.

"Yes. It's nice to meet...Reej's daughter."

The soldiers stared curiously at Meiru, while Miledi and the others broke out into a cold sweat.

"Wh-What should we do, O-kun?! What if this turns into a bloodbath?!"

"Don't ask me! Morgan, what's going on here?!"

"I-I don't know! His Highness never once mentioned that his mother might know the truth as well!"

"Wait, I know! We should get the only other married man here, Lau-chan-san, to mediate!"

"Heh, my family's in shambles, but if you still want me to...I'll try."

"Oh no, just mentioning Laus's family dealt a critical hit to him."

"Laus's confidence in his ability as a family man has hit rock bottom... Just what happened back in the Dragon Kingdom?"

In order to keep their conversation a secret from the soldiers and the queen, Miledi and the others were talking via telepathy artifacts. However, while they were still struggling to think of what to do, Anya turned to her men and ordered them to leave the room and not listen in on their conversation.

"We can't leave you, Your Majesty!"

"Morgan Curtis and Nevrai Fist are Prince Alfard's subordinates. Moreover, they went missing three years ago!"

"Look at how battered they are. Plus, they guided these ruffians here without permission. Who knows what's happened to them since they went missing!"

“They are clearly dangerous foes! Please reconsider, Your Majesty!”

It was technically true that Morgan and Nevrai had been chimerafied, and that they’d brought Miledi and the others to Dastia without permission, so they couldn’t really brush aside what the guards were saying. Miledi and the others stared down at their feet, waiting with bated breath for what the queen might say.

Seeing how guilty the Liberators looked, the soldiers got even more suspicious and glared pointedly at them.

“The Arbiter of Truth judged them harmless.”

That was the name of the artifact passed down within the royal family. It was an invisible barrier that spread out radially from the castle, connecting across towers and fortresses strategically placed at regular intervals around the boundaries of the kingdom.

The royal family could immediately tell if anyone passing through it meant Dastia harm, and then keep them out. However, Anya did shoot a wary glance over at Laus. She knew it was possible to deceive the Arbiter of Truth with spirit magic. In the end, she didn’t say anything, though.

“This conversation involves a secret of the royal family. Besides...” Anya trailed off, shooting a cold look over at her soldiers.

“Those seven are ancient magic users. If they truly wished to destroy us, they could. Please understand that this is something for me to handle and leave before they change their mind.”

“But... Very well. As you wish, Your Majesty. We will be close though, so if anything happens, call for us.”

“Of course. Thank you.”

It was humiliating to be told they lacked the strength to protect their charge, but the soldiers were skilled enough to know the measure of their strength. They knew their queen was right, and so, despite their humiliation, they did as she asked.

“Y-You’re treating us like some kind of natural disaster, but I promise we have no intention of harming you, no matter what happens. Please believe...uhhh, no, sorry.”

Miledi tried to put the soldiers at ease with a smile, but their furious glares shut her up. The soldiers then grumpily stalked out of the room, though they looked a little bit happier after shutting Miledi up.

Without even an incantation, Anya whipped up a wall of wind to soundproof the room. She then sat down on a nearby sofa and motioned for Miledi and the others to do the same.

Morgan and Nevrai remained standing at attention, however. They’d maintained their cool when the soldiers had called them traitors and insulted their changed appearances, but now they

suddenly looked nervous.

“First off—” Anya spared a brief glance at Morgan and Nevrai, then turned back to Meiru. She’d regained her composure and looked every bit like a proper head of state. “You are the Liberators, correct? I would like to know why you’ve come.”

Sensing that this was a serious discussion, Miledi straightened her back and put on her leader face. She gave Anya a brief introduction, told her what the Liberators were and what they’d accomplished, and then explained that they’d come to Dastia to learn what they could about how to defeat Ehit.

Anya placed a finger on her chin as she absorbed everything Miledi told her. For a while, there was just silence, so while they waited, Miledi and the others were struck by just how beautiful Anya was. She was almost as flawless as God’s Apostles, and when she was silent and unmoving like she was now, she almost looked like a doll. Her grace and elegance made her seem like a mature adult, but if she smiled innocently at them, she could just as easily pass as a teenager.

While they were all admiring Anya’s beauty, she organized her thoughts and began speaking again, bringing the Liberators back to reality.

“Let me start by answering your question,” Anya said, casting her gaze over the Liberators before finally coming to a stop on Miledi, who nervously waited for the verdict. “I’m afraid we cannot provide the assistance you seek.”

Miledi gritted her teeth and replied, “I realize your knowledge is extremely valuable and not something you can easily grant to outsiders, but Ehit is an enemy to the vampires as well, isn’t he? We’re on the same side, are we not?”

It wasn’t as if Miledi was asking them to hand over all of Dastia’s knowledge either, just what might give them some more insight on what they’d discovered in the Dragon Kingdom. All they needed was a single clue.

Anya held out a hand to forestall any further pleading and stated, “Please don’t misunderstand.”

“Huh?”

“It isn’t that we do not *want* to help you. The problem is we currently have no way of giving you access to the vast stores of knowledge the royal family possesses.”

Miledi and the others exchanged confused glances.

“That is, in fact, part of the reason why I invited you into our country.”

The implication was, of course, that Dastia had some problem that they needed the Liberators’ help to resolve.

“My, and here I thought you’d come just to yell at me. You were

staring quite intently at me through that bird of yours. Now I just feel like I was being too self-conscious,” Meiru said, steering the conversation in a completely different direction. As always, she didn’t bother reading the mood at all. However, to Miledi and the others’ surprise, Anya blushed and bashfully looked away. It was a very cute gesture, and the guys all pointedly avoided staring at her, lest they be sucked in by her charm. The last thing they wanted was to develop a crush on a married woman, after all. Unsurprisingly, Miledi glared at Oscar.

“That was because...your eyes look just like his,” Anya said, though it sounded like an excuse. Her queenly grace crumbled, and she looked wistfully into Meiru’s eyes.

“You mean...?”

“Yes, I am, of course, talking about your father,” she said simply, and Morgan and Nevrai nearly passed out.

“You knew?” Meiru asked.

“Not until I laid eyes on you,” Anya replied, looking off into the distance.

“The day before the coronation ceremony, I saw him...”

On that day, Alesand had cooped himself up in his room and ordered that no one disturb him. Anya had been worried about him, so she’d had her familiar snoop on him.

“You saw him doing what?” Meiru asked.

“Staring longingly at a portrait. After he was done, he tearfully ripped it apart and threw it away.”

“Was it a portrait of...?” Meiru trailed off as Anya turned to her.

“A woman who looked just like you.”

Neither Meiru nor anyone else could figure out what emotions lay within Anya’s eyes at that moment. However, it was clear her feelings on the matter were complicated. Moreover, the sheer amount of longing in her gaze was enough to captivate any man that might have looked at her in that instant.

“I’m sorry, Reej.’ That was what he said as he tore up the portrait.”

Anya had never been able to bring herself to ask who Reej was, especially because it felt like she’d seen something she definitely shouldn’t have.

“But you still love him, don’t you?”

“Yes, from the bottom of my heart. Our marriage may have been a political one, but I have always loved him.”

Meiru looked into Anya’s eyes, saying nothing. Miledi and the others knew it wasn’t their place to say anything, so they just silently watched on.

Eventually, Anya seemed to see something in Meiru’s unwavering

crimson eyes and shook her head with a slight smile.

In response, Meiru muttered, "You don't want me to meet the king, do you?"

"No, actually, I very much do. However, I'm afraid it's no longer possible."

It didn't escape Anya's notice that Meiru said the king instead of my father.

"King Alesand passed away two years ago."

"Oh no..." Morgan and Nevrai muttered in shock. Miledi and the others looked disappointed as well.

"So he's no longer...?"

"Yes, the illness took him. But he passed away peacefully, in his sleep."

"I see," Meiru said simply, closing her eyes. Anya wasn't sure if that was Meiru's way of mourning him or not, but she decided to interpret it as such. Her expression softened as she looked at Meiru.

"Y-Your Majesty. Forgive me for speaking out of turn, but if...if His Majesty is dead, then is Alfard-sama the new king?" Morgan asked, shaken.

Anya, Miledi, and the others quickly changed gears. It was time to talk about matters of state once more.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to get sidetracked." Anya turned to Morgan.

"Alfard is currently missing."

"Wh-Wh-What do you mean?!"

"He eloped."

"Wait, what?!"

"I suppose to put it simply, he takes after the two of us in ways I hadn't expected."

"That's not an explanation!" Morgan and Nevrai shouted simultaneously.

Apparently, the heir to the throne had eloped with his sweetheart and ran away. When Morgan and Nevrai finally understood that, they cradled their heads sadly.

"Umm, is what you want our help with related to the fact that the prince vanished?" Miledi asked hesitantly, and Anya nodded with a sigh.

"Before I explain, I need to confirm something. Morgan, Nevrai, what have you been doing for the past three years? Judging by your reactions, I doubt it, but you aren't helping Alfard hide, are you?"

"Absolutely not."

Morgan calmed himself down and explained what had happened to them. When he touched on the experiments and body modifications, Anya furrowed her brow and said, "How could they sully your blood like that? Both the Curtis and the Fist families come

from a long line of pureblood vampires...”

Morgan and Nevrai frowned unhappily upon hearing that, but only for a moment as Anya instantly realized what she was saying and shook her head.

“I’m sorry. I know you yourselves haven’t changed, nor has your loyalty to Alfard. I shouldn’t have said such insensitive things.”

Morgan and Nevrai had expected Anya to berate them for letting their blood get tainted, so they were surprised to hear an apology.

“O-Oh no, it’s quite all right!”

“Please raise your head, Your Majesty!”

Naturally, Anya came from a pureblood noble family as well. One that could trace its lineage back to one of Dastia’s ancient kings, even. Thus, it wasn’t too surprising that she had the same conservative, traditional views as most vampire nobility. She respected blood purity and the history that could be traced back through blood. Mixed breeds were deserving of nothing but scorn, and both the parents of mixed breeds and mixed breeds themselves weren’t worthy of being true citizens of Dastia.

Considering the fact she held such views, it said a lot about how much she must have loved Alesand if she’d guessed that he had an illegitimate mixed-breed child and kept that secret for him. However, her ability to accept Alesand for who he was also helped her accept Morgan and Nevrai despite their changes. Plus, it was also what allowed her to rethink her own mindset.

“No, it’s important that I apologize. As someone who loved Alesand-sama, I need to be able to accept these things. Besides, it was exactly this mindset of mine that must have driven Alfard to such desperate lengths.”

Anya looked down, her voice full of regret as she explained what had happened.

For many years now, there had been someone Alfard loved deeply. However, she was a human woman. After Alesand died and people were preparing to name him king, Alfard publicly acknowledged the existence of his lover. Furthermore, he stated that so long as Dastia didn’t accept his marriage to her, he would never take the throne.

Upon hearing that, Morgan and Nevrai nodded in understanding.

“I see... That was why he wanted to find Meiru-dono so badly...”

“He wanted to prove there was precedent with the past king to force the people to accept his own marriage.”

Of course, it was possible he also just wanted to hand the throne over to Meiru instead. Either way, he’d been searching for Meiru to shake up the isolated conservative vampire society’s values regarding blood purity.

"I thought this nation was home to only vampires? Did Prince Alfard find his lover in the outside world?" Lyutillis asked, cocking her head.

"Our country is dotted with human villages."

"What for?" Miledi asked, her voice dangerously low. She was imagining the worst-case scenario.

"We don't mistreat them, if that's what you think. We take in those who have nowhere else to go in the outside world and shelter them in exchange for a token amount of their blood. After all, it's human blood that suits our tastes the most."

Surprised, Oscar asked, "Does that mean...you guys shelter heretics?"

"Some of the people living within our borders would be considered such, yes. However, most of them have done so for generations. They're all natives of Dastia," she explained, prompting Miledi and the others to exchange glances. They felt a measure of relief knowing that there had been somewhere for heretics to go even before the Liberators had been formed.

"Still, I can't believe the crown prince went and eloped..." Vandre said, speaking up for the first time in a long while.

Anya could sense the unasked question in Vandre's tone, and a frown crossed her pretty features as she replied, "Do you think it was irresponsible of him? He had no choice but to run, since his beloved was in danger of being assassinated."

"Assassinated?!" Miledi shouted.

"That's pretty extreme," Oscar said, his expression grim.

Apparently, one of the hardline factions among the nobles had plotted the assassination. Alfard's brother, Sveit, had been aware of the plot, but he'd allowed it to move forward.

"When he discovered the plot, Alfard protected his beloved from the assailants. He captured them and forced them to spit out the names of the ringleaders behind the plot, then barged into their mansion and beat them half to death."

"Th-That's pretty impressive," Miledi muttered, and Oscar and the others nodded along. However, that wasn't the end of the story.

"After that, he stole their fortune and razed their mansion to the ground."

"Wait, so he's a thief?!" the Liberators shouted in unison.

Morgan and Nevrai just looked off into the distance. Their expression made it clear that it was the kind of thing Alfard might do if pushed to it. However, that wasn't even the full extent of Prince Alfard's wrath.

"Then, he stripped the ringleaders naked and left them tied up in the middle of the city square with their crimes written in blood on the

floor.”

“Holy shit, this guy is hardcore!” Miledi exclaimed.

For a noble, being humiliated in such a fashion was a fate worse than death. Alfard had clearly tried to make them suffer as much as possible. Meiru seemed suitably impressed by his deeds, while Lyutillis looked like she wished someone would do that to her. Laus hit them both with a small Soul Shock to scold them.

“Since then, two years have passed and no one’s found him. Right now, Sveit is serving as the acting king in his absence.”

Anya, meanwhile, was serving as his adviser.

“Alfard probably knows that Sveit allowed the assassination plot to happen. The two of them were never really on good terms to begin with. It started with Sveit’s one-sided grudge, but at this point, they probably both hate each other,” Anya explained.

Sveit was the reliable older brother who’d always fulfilled his duties and stayed true to the old ways, while Alfard had been the free-spirited misfit who never seemed to care much about bloodlines or blood purity. The two of them couldn’t have been any more different. Things had finally come to a head when Alesand had named Alfard the successor, and Alfard had claimed he wouldn’t take the throne unless his human lover was allowed to formally be his wife and queen. Sveit had, of course, seen that as a rejection of everything vampires stood for.

“Sveit has always been obsessed with blood purity, more than most vampires, I’d say.”

Moreover, he was part of the faction that believed that vampires were the ultimate race. His overly serious personality had led him to easily get set in his ways in the worst way possible.

“Incidentally, while most vampires do care about blood purity, it’s not for discriminatory reasons,” Morgan explained. He didn’t want Miledi and the others getting the wrong impression. “We value the history that ancient bloodlines have built up, but we don’t use that as an excuse to look down on other races as inferior.”

“So what, you’re just proud of who you are?” Miledi asked.

Morgan simply nodded with a smile. Nevrai then added, “Plus, our ideology is a way to protect us against Ehit.”

“How so?”

“Vampires are less fertile than most other races. That’s why our population is the lowest among the sentient races. Put simply, we’re a rare specimen in Ehit’s eyes.”

From Ehit’s perspective, it was much easier to play around with numerous, easily replaceable pawns than rarer, more precious ones. Essentially, the vampires were protecting themselves by making themselves so scarce that Ehit couldn’t toy around with them without

risking driving them extinct.

Sighing, Anya brought the conversation back on track by saying, "Part of the reason Alfard left was likely because he realized he couldn't trust me either."

"Wait, you *also* let the assassination plot go through?" Miledi asked, shocked.

Anya shook her head and replied, "No, I didn't know about it. However, I suspected from the moment Alfard made his declaration that *someone* would probably try something of the sort. And yet, I did nothing."

"Why not?"

"Because I was hoping it would open his eyes. I was confident he would be able to protect his beloved, but I wanted him to see just how dangerous consorting with non-vampires was for royalty."

"So you held back for the same reason my mom left, and for the same reason the king gave up on taking my mom back with him? Is that right?" Meiru asked.

"Yes."

"I see. That's what you meant when you said he takes after both of you."

Anya let out another long sigh upon hearing that.

"We need to talk about the royal line of succession. This is the part that concerns your request."

Anya went on to explain that it took more than just being named the successor by the previous king to ascend to Dastia's throne. Unless someone underwent a very specific coronation ceremony, they couldn't officially become king.

"There's a special magic circle in the basement of the royal palace."

That magic circle read the memories of whoever stepped into it and determined whether or not they had what it took to be a true king. If they did, a pillar of light would shoot up from the palace, announcing to the citizens the birth of their new leader. This was a very ancient spell that had been created back during the age of the gods. However, Alfard had refused to enter the magic circle and it had rejected Sveit.

"Only after being recognized by the magic circle is the new king granted access to the Font of Knowledge."

"Let me guess..." Miledi said with a knowing look, and Anya nodded.

"That's the entire historical record of our race, passed down from king to king. All of that history is directly implanted into their brain."

"I see... That's why you can't help us, then?"

Dastia currently had no king. The vampire nation's vast historical

records weren't kept in a library, they were all stored in the reigning king's head.

"That's...rather unexpected. And a bit of a problem," Oscar said, adjusting his glasses.

"If it checks your memories, it'll be hard to fake too. If all it did was check to see if you had royal blood, I could have just swiped that knowledge for myself, but..." Meiru mumbled, seemingly unconcerned about the repercussions of stealing the vampire kingdom's entire history.

Anya, Morgan, and Nevrai all looked at her, aghast.

"I'm sorry, she just has a bad habit of thinking like a pirate!" Miledi said, apologizing on Meiru's behalf. Laus hit Meiru with another Soul Shock, this time hard enough to rattle her.

"Ahem! Anyway, now you know where we stand," Anya said, then snapped her fingers. It seemed that was the end of their secret conversation, as the soundproofing barrier vanished and she called in one of the maids who'd traveled here with her.

A taciturn black-haired vampire woman walked into the room, pushing a cart in front of her. Sitting on the cart was a teapot full of fragrant tea and a dozen or so teacups.

The maid poured everyone a cup, bowed gracefully to the party, then retired to a corner of the room, looking so inconspicuous that even Miledi and the others almost lost sight of her.

"W-Wow..." Oscar said, impressed. As a maid fan, he obviously fully appreciated her skills. A little surprised, the maid smiled back at him. Miledi also smiled at him, but her smile made his blood run cold. He said nothing more as he picked up his teacup and hid his expression behind his glasses.

Anya gave Oscar and Miledi curious looks, but she refrained from prying and instead went on to formally make her request of the Liberators, saying, "Would you be willing to find Alfard and bring him back to the capital?"

"In return, you'll give us the information we're looking for?"

"Correct. You only need to bring Alfard back. We'll persuade him ourselves. All we want is a chance to reconcile with him."

"By we, you mean Sveit as well?" Morgan asked, and Anya nodded.

"As I said before, you need the approval of that magic circle to become Dastia's king. The people will not accept Sveit, as he was unable to pass that trial."

In other words, Dastia had been without a king for two years now. The people were getting worried, while the various noble families were vying with each other for power. The kingdom was coming apart at the seams.

Over the past two years, Sveit had been shown time and time again that he lacked what was necessary to be king. He'd become a haggard shell of his former self, but he couldn't just abandon his duties, so he continued pushing onward.

"Sveit wants to make up with Alfard as well. He's reconsidered a lot of his previous beliefs. However..." Anya trailed off, massaging her forehead as if nursing a sudden headache. "Despite searching all over for him, we haven't been able to find a single trace of where he's gone. Besides, even if we were able to pinpoint his location, if he wanted to, he could easily evade capture."

"Why's—?"

Before Miledi could finish her question, Morgan answered, "Because he's strong."

"That's it?"

"Yes. He's unbelievably strong."

"When we last saw him three years ago, he was already strong enough to beat all of our best fighters single-handedly."

Everyone considered him the strongest vampire in Dastia, which was why Anya so desperately needed Miledi and the others' help.

"I realize how dangerous allowing outsiders into the country is, but we need your strength if we are to rebuild our crumbling nation."

If Alfard could escape even the combined might of seven ancient magic users, then there really was no one who'd be able to catch him.

"So, are you willing to accept this deal?" Anya asked, tilting her head toward Miledi.

Of course, Miledi and the others had long since made up their minds.

"And so, we now have to go looking for a runaway prince," Vandre explained to Rasul through a Skynet.

"Wow, this prince sounds like one amazing guy! A real man amongst men!" Rasul replied excitedly, and Vandre let out a long sigh. Not that he'd expected his brother to react any differently.

The weather was perfect, with nary a cloud in the sky. From atop the mountain peaks, the Azure Lands looked beautiful. Behind him, Vandre could hear some of the vampire soldiers talking to Naiz.

"H-Hey, is that really the Demon Lord?"

"I get how you feel, but yeah, that's him."

"That cheerful weirdo?"

"Yep."

"I don't believe it. First I see the queen of the Pale Forest begging Meiru-dono to sit on her...and now this... Is the outside world doing okay?"

"Well, it kind of isn't, which is why we came to visit Dastia in the

first place.”

“How cruel!” Lyutillis said, butting in. “I was just—”

“Please just shut up, Lyu.”

“Ah...! Nacchan-san, you’ve been colder to me than usual lately... Haaah... Haaah...”

“The outside world seems terrifying,” the soldiers said with a shiver.

After their conversation with Anya, Miledi and the others had discovered that they couldn’t contact anyone outside Dastia via Skynet. Apparently, the Arbiter of Truth barrier blocked all communications as well. Thus, Vandre, Naiz, and Lyutillis had headed out into the mountainous marshlands to give their report to their allies...with some vampire soldiers tagging along to keep an eye on them.

Due to how remote the Azure Lands were, they couldn’t reach the entire continent with their Skynet, but since Rasul and the demon soldiers had safely made it to a demon fortress north of the Azure Lands, Vandre had been able to get in touch with them. Rasul would then relay their report to all the other Liberators scattered throughout the continent.

One unfortunate side effect of this relay method of communication though was that the vampires now had absolutely no respect for the Demon Lord.

Vandre could see Elga massaging his temples a short distance behind Rasul. Lestina was pleading with Rasul to act more stately too. For a moment, Elga was worried the prestige and dignity of demons had been ruined forever, but after Vandre finished his report, Rasul’s demeanor suddenly changed and he gave Vandre a serious look. The vampires gulped upon seeing Rasul’s more intimidating side for the first time.

“If that’s all, I have a report of my own to make.”

“What happened, brother?” Vandre asked.

“The church has appointed a new pope, one who goes by the name Darrion Kaus.”

“That’s impossible! We killed him!”

“I know. Everyone across the world saw the Paladins perish. And yet, the church still claims that their new pope is him, rather than any of the surviving archbishops. I don’t like that one bit. According to the church, Darrion survived, but they haven’t publicized any further details. Right now, the Liberators’ spies are trying to ascertain whether or not it’s the real Darrion Kaus.”

“What the hell is the church planning?”

“I don’t know. But, Van, you need to hurry. My gut is telling me that something bad is coming...and soon.”

“Got it. I’ll let Miledi and the others know. Your gut’s never been wrong before. Oh, and be careful out there, okay?”

“Heh, who do you think you’re talking to? I’m the Demon Lord, remember?”

In a flash, Rasul went from looking like an imposing, majestic Demon Lord back to a playful little kid as he grinned at Vandre and shrugged. He then went on to tell Vandre that almost all the Liberators were accounted for to end on a bit of good news, and soon ended the call. Vandre turned back to see Naiz and Lyutillis wearing determined looks on their faces.

Seeing the Liberators looking truly serious for the first time, the vampires finally realized how grave the situation was in the outside world.

The Liberators began their search for the prince early the next morning. Miledi ferried her group of three across the skies, while Laus, one of the other group members, sent out probes of spirit magic to see what he could find. Meiru, the final group member, used restoration magic on both of them so they could keep casting for longer.

The rest of the Liberators had also split into trios. Oscar and Naiz were traveling with Morgan, while Vandre and Lyutillis were with Nevrai. Morgan and Nevrai had known Alfard since childhood, so they planned to check on all the locations they’d explored as kids. The reason Oscar and Lyutillis were on separate squads was because they both had their own ways to see through camouflages and disguises.

After Vandre had relayed Rasul’s message to Miledi and the others, they’d all decided that they needed to find Alfard as quickly as possible. As they flew through the skies though, Miledi put that out of her mind for a moment and grinned at Meiru.

“Come on, Meru-nee, isn’t it about time you stopped sulking?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“I know the queen lectured you for ages last night, but there’s no reason to feel down about that! By the way, how does it feel knowing your dad’s second wife hates—?! Ow!”

Meiru smacked Miledi across the face with a water whip, cutting her off. But even as she spun through the air, Miledi made sure to perfectly control Laus and Meiru’s flight trajectory with her gravity magic, showcasing her impeccable control.

“Come to think of it, you haven’t been acting very annoying recently. Seeing your annoying side again was so nostalgic that I accidentally hit you.”

“Focus on the task at hand, you two,” Laus said in an aggravated voice. He was using his spirit magic to its fullest extent, picking up on

the souls of even the monsters and animals in the forest below, so he was a little on edge.

“But, Lau-chan, wasn’t it absolutely hilarious—I mean, wasn’t Meru-nee so cute when she was looking to us for help?”

“I will admit it was rare to see her chastised like a child.”

“Not you too, Laus-kun?”

“Didn’t your stepmother just lecture you about using the proper honorifics for your elders?” Laus asked with a mischievous grin.

“Rrrgh...”

For once, Meiru was at a loss for words.

After negotiations had finished and the deal had been struck, Miledi and the others had been invited to the royal palace. There, they’d hashed out more concrete plans for how they’d look for Alfard, and they’d also introduced themselves to the acting king, Sveit. They’d needed his permission to run around the country unsupervised, and they also needed to discuss what to do once Alfard had been brought back.

Only Sveit and a few of his closest retainers had been told the plan, and Sveit had readily agreed to give Miledi the information she wanted if she could retrieve Alfard. However, when Sveit had been told about Meiru’s true identity, he’d needed multiple Soul’s Reposes to recover from his shock.

By the time all the discussion was over, night had fallen, so the party was invited to dine with the queen and given chambers within the palace. And throughout the meal, Anya had complained about Meiru’s table manners, her regular manners, and her attitude toward royalty.

At first everyone had thought Anya was resentful of Meiru, but over time, they realized that wasn’t the case.

“I can’t believe she asked you everything from what your favorite food was to what kind of accessories you liked. She really wanted to know everything about you, huh?”

The reason Anya had been so fussy with Meiru was because she actually liked her.

Anya had even complained that Meiru was too scantily clad for a girl and had pushed several dresses onto her.

Grinning, Miledi said, “I was worried she might have some ulterior motive, so I interrogated one of the maids, and apparently, Queen Anya always wanted a daughter, which was why she—”

“Aaaaaah, I can’t hear youuuuuu!”

“The maid also said she’d never seen the queen look so excited. Apparently, she’s normally a lot more reserved.”

“Oh, shut up already!” Meiru snapped, frowning. “I don’t get that woman at all! I’m her husband’s illegitimate child! Normally, you’d

hate someone like that! Or at the very least, you wouldn't want to be around them! But instead, she's lecturing me about my manners and telling me how I should dress, going on about how my mom wouldn't want to see me like this! Sheesh, does she never get tired of lecturing people?!"

For all her complaining though, Meiru didn't look all that annoyed by the attention she'd gotten.

"I dunno, you seemed to be enjoying it," Miledi teased.

"She's like a teenager in her rebellious phase. I can't believe she tries to act like the older sister in the group when— Oww!"

This time it was Laus who got a taste of her water whip right on his bald head. His wet head reflected the sunlight right into Miledi's eyes, who screamed, "It's so bright!"

Meiru was a master of teasing other people, but she wasn't used to being on the receiving end. It looked like she was about to start sulking for real, so Miledi and Laus held in their laughter.

After dinner was over and Anya had finished lecturing Meiru, she'd taken her to Alesand's grave. The two of them had spent a lot of time there, presumably talking about what kind of person Meiru's father had been. When Meiru had returned, she'd acted normal, but it was clear she was grappling with a lot of complex emotions.

"Thanks for trying to cheer me up, guys, but you don't need to worry. I'm in top form," Meiru said, prompting Miledi and Laus to exchange stunned looks. It seemed Meiru had seen right through them. Regardless, they'd been worried Meiru's relationship with the vampire kingdom would end up a lot more sinister, so it was heartening to see that Anya cared for her.

"Things are finally looking up for us!" Miledi said with a smile. "I bet we'll find Prince Alfard in no time!"

Three days of fruitless searching passed.

"Where the heck is he...?" Miledi said, staring blankly down at the untouched meal in front of her.

Oscar and the others looked similarly defeated.

Anya and Sveit, who were also sitting at the dining table, looked off into the distance. They'd both spent two years searching for Alfard, so they knew just how Miledi and the others felt.

"Maybe he's left the country...?" Sveit muttered, and a shiver ran down everyone's spine. Sveit had only just turned twenty, but his blond hair was already beginning to thin and the bags under his eyes were barely hidden by his silver-rimmed glasses.

"L-Look, it's just a possibility. We don't know for certain," Sveit added hurriedly when he saw the despair in everyone's eyes.

"Right, but if he has, then we're doomed, aren't we?" Meiru said, looking up at the ceiling.

If Alfard really had left, it would mean he'd abandoned his homeland completely. It would also make finding him infinitely more difficult.

"Come to think of it, we haven't searched the marshes yet, have we?" Lyutillis said.

"There's no way he'd go to such a dangerous—" Morgan replied, but then suddenly caught himself.

"I imagine for someone as strong as Prince Alfard, the marshes wouldn't be all that dangerous, would they?" Oscar asked.

With a stiff expression, Sveit replied, "We pretty much never patrol the marshes to the northwest, near where they border the ocean. The forest is too dense there, and the monsters that inhabit that section of the marshes are even more dangerous than the other regions..."

There was also no reason to patrol that zone, since it made far more sense for anyone trying to infiltrate the country to come by sea rather than purposely land in the Azure Land's most dangerous area and push through on land.

Everyone exchanged glances. It was clear where they'd need to search next.

The next day, everyone once again split into three groups and started combing the marsh. Before long, Miledi's group struck gold.

"Pursuers?"

She finally found where Alfard was hiding. He'd woven a camouflage barrier that was so perfect Miledi couldn't even sense the mana powering the spell. Were it not for Laus's spirit magic and Lyutillis's analytical skills, they would have never noticed. However, hidden near the coast, next to a small spring, hidden by a thicket of trees, was a log cabin decorated with vines and flowers. There was a small wooden swing in the front yard and a big vegetable field.

Standing outside the cabin was a beautiful young man, the very same one who'd spoken when Miledi and the others arrived. He had short, cropped blond hair and a face that greatly resembled Anya's. His baggy clothes couldn't hide his perfect physique either. However, he was wearing a straw hat and overalls, had a towel wrapped around his neck, and a hoe resting on his shoulder. He looked like a veteran farmer.

"U-Umm...are you Prince Alfard?"

"Yeah. I guess if you know who I am, you're not lost travelers," Alfard said, narrowing his eyes warily. His intimidating stare was at complete odds with his rustic farmer's appearance. Still, it was hard to feel nervous when he looked like he'd just gotten done plowing fields.

"W-We came looking for you at Queen Anya's request."

"Hm?" Alfard mumbled, cocking his head. His expression made it

clear he was wondering why she'd asked outsiders to look for him. He cast his gaze over Miledi, Meiru, and Laus, scrutinizing each of them in turn. His eyes stopped on Meiru for a moment, but then when Laus turned to look at the log cabin, Alfard suddenly closed his eyes and there was a huge explosion.

"Huh?"

"What the—?!"

Miledi and Meiru turned in surprise to see that Alfard had punched Laus, who'd brought his arms up to guard the blow. However, the force of the punch had knocked Laus back into a nearby tree.

"Tch, I recognize that face. You're the Holy Templar Knights' commander."

Alfard's mana started swirling around him as he prepared for battle.

"Wait! I don't serve the church anymore! I'm part of the Liberators, an anti-church organization!"

"Hah, you expect me to believe the church's strongest knight joined a rebel group? I'm not that stupid. Besides, you were about to cast magic on the house, weren't you?"

Crap, he saw right through me... Laus thought, gritting his teeth. It was true that he'd tried to use spirit magic on the house, as he'd sensed two people inside it. *One of them is probably Alfard's lover, but who's the second? Did someone sneak into his house while he was distracted?*

The problem was, Laus hadn't expected Alfard to notice him using spirit magic. He was as sharp at sensing the flow of mana as Miledi was, it seemed.

"Wait, this is all a misunderstanding, Your Highness! Please listen!"

"You sound just like the guys who tried to kill my wife!"

A second later, thousands of fireballs appeared all around Alfard. Each one had been highly compressed and boasted immense power.

Alfard's magical prowess was nearly a match for Miledi's...and that wasn't all either.

"Seriously, calm down," Meiru said, attempting to summon up a water barrier. There was plenty of water in the streams and springs nearby, so she figured she wouldn't have any trouble.

"Huh?!"

However, the water rebuffed her mana, denying her the ability to control it.

"This is my territory, remember?"

A skilled fighter used the terrain to their advantage. Alfard knew that, which was why he'd made sure all the nearby terrain worked in

his favor.

Meiru's expression stiffened as he then launched his barrage of fireballs at the group. At the same time, a group of earth golems rose from the ground and grabbed the party's legs, while branches and vines shot out to restrain their upper bodies.

It was at this point that Miledi and the others realized that he'd permeated the entire region with his mana, transforming it into his zone of control. No one else's mana could affect anything around here.

Meanwhile, Alfard could control the terrain as easily as Lyutillis manipulated the forest back in Haltina.

"We're sorry about what Lau-chan did, but he didn't mean any harm! I promise!"

"I see. In that case, you wouldn't mind if I ran away then, would you?"

"We would!"

The Liberators were short on time. They couldn't have Alfard vanishing on them. Realizing she didn't have much of a choice, Miledi activated her gravity magic, knocking the barrage of fireballs down to the ground.

Alfard stared at her in shock, but he quickly recovered from his surprise and placed a hand on the ground.

"Thunder Snake."

Snaking bolts of lightning shot out of every water source, assailing Miledi and the others from all sides. The three of them quickly deployed barriers to protect themselves, but they couldn't ward against the lightning attacks coming from the plants and golems restraining them, so they stiffened momentarily as lightning coursed through them.

Alfard had immediately analyzed the properties of gravity magic and had attacked with the element Miledi had the hardest time defending against. He then followed up by wrapping sharp branches in fierce winds and launching them at Miledi and the others. The branches were coated in sap that looked rather poisonous as well. He truly was a master of combat.

The vampire prince was using exactly as much strength as he needed to launch pinpoint attacks to keep his enemies at bay. Any regular foe would have been instantly neutralized by him, but of course, Miledi, Meiru, and Laus were far from regular.

Miledi instantly knocked the needles down with gravity magic.

"Sorry, but we're kinda desperate here! The fate of the world's resting on us!" Laus shouted, hitting Alfard with a Soul Shock that temporarily staggered him.

"I'm starting to get a little angry," Meiru said, summoning her own water from her Treasure Trove and forming a water prison

around Alfard. Technically, their employer had said they could bring Alfard back by force if necessary...so they could be a little rough as long as they didn't do any lasting harm. However, it seemed Miledi and the others would have to get more than just "a little rough."

"Tch, you guys sure are tough," Alfard said.

"No way!"

He dispersed Meiru's water prison with ease. Not only that, but he did it by completely dismantling Meiru's spell rather than countering with one of his own. All spells had a core, which served as the focal point and sort of blueprint of the spell.

Alfard had figured out exactly where the core of Meiru's spell had been in an instant, then destroyed it.

Miledi could see now what Morgan had meant when he'd said Alfard was insanely strong. Destroying a spell's core wasn't something that could be done with just good intuition, after all. You needed a deep understanding of magic, as well as a ton of training on top of that before you could destroy spells quickly enough to be of any use in combat.

Miledi and the others were so shaken that they momentarily stopped their attacks. Taking advantage of that opening, Alfard summoned a sea of blue flames above him. He'd taken the strongest fire spell, Azure Blaze, and combined it with Conflagration Storm to create an endless wave of fiery destruction. This new spell was called Azure Conflagration.

"Wait, hang on, if you fire that off, you won't come out unscathed either!" Miledi shouted in a panic.

In fact, Alfard would probably be the only one to get hurt by it, since the Liberators all had a few tricks up their sleeves to stop something like that.

However, Alfard just shook his head and said, "Don't worry, it won't hurt much."

Is this just a bluff? Or is it a distraction while he prepares something else? Miledi thought, feeling momentarily relieved.

Grinning, Alfard added, "Or at least, it won't hurt me much."

"What about us?!"

Alfard swung his arm down, casually flinging the sea of fire at Miledi and the others. The surrounding forest was vaporized instantly. Steam rose from the streams and springs, while the air burned so hot it killed all living creatures in the vicinity.

"You guys are dangerous! I'm gonna have to bury you here!"

"Why are you so murder-happy?!"

"God, you're so stubborn!"

"Don't let your guard down! Who knows what he'll try next!"

Miledi and the others could handle the flames, but Alfard had

been counting on them to stop his spell. His real goal had been to create a veil of steam that Meiru couldn't easily dispel. Laus realized that a second later and shouted, "Huh?! Shit, we've been duped! Miledi, it doesn't matter how much collateral damage it causes, swallow up everything around us!"

Miledi was still confused, but she placed her faith in Laus and summoned a Spatial Severance, absorbing all of the steam and the flames. Had Alfard been anywhere in the vicinity, he would have been heavily injured, but fortunately, he wasn't. In fact, he was all the way over near the shore.

"....."

Miledi and Meiru exchanged glances. After boasting about how he was going to kill them and firing off such a powerful spell, he'd immediately started running away. No one could have predicted that.

"That prince sure got us good," Laus said, sounding impressed.

Standing next to Alfard was a plain-looking woman with black hair with a small child in her arms.

Alfard glanced back to see what had happened to Miledi and the others, and a hint of panic entered his expression as he saw they'd already dealt with his flames.

From the very start, he hadn't been trying to fight seriously. This had all been a calculated plan to escape. In truth, he'd even believed Laus when he'd said he didn't want to hurt Alfard. However, Alfard was up against the church's strongest knight, and someone who could control gravity. While Alfard had sensed Laus's initial spell, he knew that if Laus had tried to actually attack, he had no way of defending against magic of that nature. Moreover, Alfard could tell Miledi and the others were desperate to catch him.

That scared him, for he knew he couldn't actually match up to these three in a serious fight, and his family was close by.

From his perspective, if he'd stuck around to hear them out and negotiations broke down, it was entirely possible that Miledi and the others would try to take his family hostage. That was an utterly unacceptable outcome in his eyes, which was why he'd pretended to be belligerent, while secretly looking for an opportunity to get his family to safety.

Seeing that Miledi and the others were free, Alfard took a jewel out of his pocket and started pouring mana into it.

"Miledi, below us! Hold it down!"

"Whoa—Heavensfall!"

Miledi sensed a huge surge of mana from the ground below. As the three of them leaped up, she pushed down with a powerful gravity field.

A second later, the ground burst, but whatever would have

jumped out of it was forced back down. That had been one dangerous booby trap.

“We really can’t let our guard down around that prince.”

Looking up, Miledi and the others saw a giant black eagle coming in from the coast. Moreover, a multi-layered barrier had been activated around the log cabin, trapping the Liberators. It seemed there was a powerful artifact inside. The barrier it had made was strong enough that it would take a Heavencrush to destroy.

“He was really thorough with his defenses.”

“This isn’t the time to be praising him!”

“Agh, he’s getting full of himself because we’re holding back!”

Meiru was at her limits, so she sucked in a huge breath and shouted, “Alfaaaaaaaard! You’ve been looking for me this whole time, haven’t you?! I finally came to see you, but now you’re pretending like you don’t know me? How cruel!”

She was obviously trying to cause a misunderstanding. And unsurprisingly, the black-haired woman next to Alfard stiffened in response.

“A-Al-sama? What is she talking about?” she asked in a confused voice.

Laus, who was also having some family troubles of his own at the moment, looked at Meiru like she was the devil incarnate, but Meiru simply ignored him and continued sowing discord.

“The daughter you’re looking for is right here!”

“Meru-nee, don’t say something so misleading!”

“She’s pure evil.”

It was true that Meiru was the daughter of Alfard’s dad, and that he’d been looking for her, but of course, she was omitting the most crucial information. She really was the devil. And yet, Alfard didn’t falter even once.

“I don’t know her,” he stated flatly.

“Really?” the woman asked, and he nodded to reply.

Alfard then pointed at Meiru and said in a loud voice, “I mean, just look at how pathetic she looks, Selene!”

“Huh?” Meiru said, and Selene also turned to look at Meiru in confusion.

“She ticks all the boxes of a failure of a woman. She’s lazy, selfish, greedy, and if I’m not mistaken, she’s also a sadist.”

“Is he psychic?!” Miledi exclaimed.

“Miledi-chan?!”

“I bet she’s horrible at housework too. Anything she tries to cook would probably come out as a grotesque travesty that’d kill anyone who ate it. Worse, she probably can’t hold a steady job! I bet she’d rather shake down people on the street than work for honest pay!”

“Wow, he’s analyzed you perfectly!”

“If you gave her a comfy bed, I bet she’d snuggle up inside it and never leave it again!”

“Has he been spying on you?!” Miledi said, impressed. Alfard’s observational skills were ancient magic-tier.

Meiru hadn’t been expecting such a powerful verbal counter, so she was left trembling.

“Do you really think a woman like that would appeal to me in the slightest when I have someone as wonderful as you, Selene?”

“Al-sama...”

“She’s lacking in every department. Besides, there isn’t a single woman in the world more charming than you, Selene. The only one I will ever love is you.”

“N-Now you’re just exaggerating, Al-sama...” Selene muttered, blushing furiously. She rocked back and forth, which seemed to unintentionally soothe the baby in her arms.

“Are they just flirting now?” Laus asked, his eyes glazing over.

As the two of them hugged, Alfard surreptitiously placed Selene and their child onto the eagle’s back. However, just before he ordered it to take off, he heard a familiar voice call out to him.

“Your Highness, please wait!”

At long last, the other search parties had arrived. Miledi had contacted them as soon as they’d found Alfard, but it had taken some time to make it all the way over.

Alfard turned in surprise and said, “Morgan! Nevrai! You’re alive?!”

Morgan and Nevrai ran over and knelt before Alfard. Oscar, Vandre, and Lyutillis were a short distance behind them, while Naiz slipped through the barrier and teleported over to where Miledi and the others were.

Alfard’s expression grew nervous, and cold sweat poured down his forehead. This was more adversaries than he could handle.

“Your Highness! We’ve finally returned from our mission. I’m terribly sorry it took so much longer than expected. However, I’m glad to report that we’ve succeeded.”

“You have? Oh, I see. She must be...” Alfard trailed off as he turned back to Meiru, looking at her with renewed interest.

“You do have all the right traits... What was your mother’s name?”

“Reej.”

“I see... I guess it’s a bit late to be formal now, but do you want me to address you with a title or something?”

“You can just call me Meiru-onee-chan,” she said with a wink, which Alfard completely ignored.

“Umm, Al-sama. If she’s your older sister, does that mean she’s the one who...?” Selene asked, shushing her child, who had started crying.

She looked to be no older than eighteen or nineteen, and while she looked cute enough, it was hard to see her as anything more than a simple village girl. As far as Miledi and the others could tell, she wasn’t especially skilled at magic or fighting.

“That’s right, Selene. She’s the woman I told you about. It seems she really does exist. No wonder I felt a sense of déjà vu when I first laid eyes on her.”

Unfortunately, the appearance of the Holy Templar Knights’ former captain had temporarily pushed all thoughts of Meiru out of Alfard’s mind.

Selene hurriedly got off the eagle, bowed to Meiru, and said, “My name is Selene, Nee-sama. I’m Alfard’s wife.”

“Huh,” Meiru said, sounding a little impressed. Despite being a simple village girl, Selene was quite bold. She didn’t hesitate at all to call herself Alfard’s wife. Moreover, she didn’t seem at all arrogant about the fact that Alfard had chosen her over everyone else. Meiru could tell that much just by looking into Selene’s reddish-brown eyes.

Selene was proud to be Alfard’s wife, and she had resolved to go through whatever hardships that might bring, but she was proud in the same way a mother was proud of their child. At the very least, it was clear she wasn’t *just* a simple village girl. She had the same resilience as a lone flower blooming in a barren desert.

“It’s nice to meet you, Selene-chan. I’m Meiru Melusine, a pirate captain,” Meiru said, adding that last bit to try and rattle Selene a little.

“You are a dagon, after all,” Selene replied, completely unfazed. If anything, she seemed to respect Meiru more upon hearing that.

Miledi and the others cocked their heads at Selene, looking a bit confused.

“Is he your son?” Meiru asked.

“Yes, his name is Albanor. He turned one recently.”

“Albanor... That’s a good name.”

“Thank you. In the old tongue, it means ‘the moon at dawn.’”

“My, the more I learn about it, the more splendid the name sounds. It really matches his gold-and-black streaked hair. You’re gonna grow up to be quite handsome, aren’t you?”

Albanor had stopped crying, and he was now staring at Meiru with great interest. It seemed he had taken quite a liking to her. Morgan and Nevrai seemed pleasantly surprised that Meiru was so good with kids, while Miledi and the others watched on warmly. But then, Morgan and Nevrai took a few deep breaths and turned to Alfard, their expressions a mix of regret and guilt.

“You two... What happened?”

“It’s a very long story. As you can see, our bodies have been modified, but please believe us when we say our loyalty to you is as unwavering as ever!”

“Please listen to what our companions have to say, Your Highness. The world is currently in grave danger. We’ve seen that for ourselves. These people need your help! Please don’t turn them away!”

“You don’t have to prostrate yourselves to me. Raise your heads and look into my eyes,” Alfard clearly stated.

Morgan and Nevrai looked up to see Alfard’s unwavering eyes looking straight at them. They met his gaze with the same unwavering determination, and Alfard eventually shrugged.

“Welcome home, Morgan, Nevrai. I’m sorry you had to suffer due to my selfishness...and I’m truly glad that you returned alive.”

Alfard got on his knees and hugged both of them. He could tell from their trembling shoulders how worried they’d been that he wouldn’t accept them now that they’d come back changed. But now, Morgan and Nevrai felt like they’d truly returned home for the first time.

Tears spilled from their eyes, and for a while, the three of them just stayed like that. Eventually, though, Alfard rose to his feet and turned to Miledi and the others. Reflected in his eyes was the commander of the Holy Templar Knights, his father’s long-lost daughter, a girl who could control gravity, a cross between a demon and a dragonman, a man decked out in more legendary artifacts than he’d ever seen in his life, another man who could seemingly ignore barriers entirely, and a graceful-looking elf.

“Well, it doesn’t look like I’ll be able to run away from these guys even if I wanted to. Plus, it sounds like something serious is going on. All right, fine. I’ll trust Morgan and hear you guys out,” Alfard said with a wry grin, prompting Miledi and the others to breathe a sigh of relief.

The group returned to the log cabin, at which point Miledi and the others spent the next hour explaining everything to Alfard.

“I see. I can’t believe the world has changed so much over the past year,” Alfard said, looking up at the ceiling as he organized his thoughts.

Selene stroked Albanor’s cheek and looked softly down at his sleeping face.

“This might be the world’s only chance to destroy Ehit. This is no time for petty inheritance disputes. Very well, then. I’ll give you my full cooperation,” Alfard stated, looking back down at everyone.

“R-Really? You’re sure?” Miledi asked, taken aback that he’d

agreed to return so easily. Oscar and the others looked similarly surprised.

“Yeah. If you guys had just been a bunch of empty-headed idealists, I wouldn’t agree so easily, but you’ve already shown you have what it takes to actually beat him. In my mind, refusing you would be the same as dooming the mortal races of Tortus,” Alfard replied, looking lovingly down at Selene and Albanor.

“Ehit is a danger to the people who matter the most to me as well. If I want to keep them safe, he needs to die.”

“Al-sama...”

“Selene...”

The two of them stared into each other’s eyes. Naiz put his cup of tea down. Even though it was straight black tea, it suddenly tasted as sweet as a milkshake.

“Does that mean you’ll come back to take the throne, Your Highness?” Morgan asked expectantly.

“Definitely not.”

Everyone looked at him in confusion.

“Why in the world would I become the king of a country that refuses to recognize Selene as my wife?” Alfard said as if that should have been obvious. It made Morgan and the others question their own sanity for a second, making them wonder if they were the weird ones for asking that question.

“B-But, Your Highness, our nation is currently in great turmoil!”

“Not my problem.”

“What do you mean it’s not your problem?!”

“This isn’t the time to be acting selfish, Your Highness!”

“Oh, shut up! Listen up, and listen well, you guys,” Alfard said. Then, he pointed his finger up at the sky and said in a booming voice, “The lives of Selene and Albanor matter more to me than the lives of all vampires combined! That should be obvious!”

“No member of the royal family should be saying things like that!”

“Why are you always so unreasonable, Your Highness?!”

Morgan, Nevrai, and Alfard glared at each other, looking like delinquents who were about to start a fight.

Miledi gave Selene a pleading look, begging her to intervene, but Selene simply grinned and said, “Oh, Al-sama.”

Oh no, these guys are messed up in the head...

Resigning herself to her fate, Miledi stepped in to break up the fight.

“The queen said you need to officially ascend the throne to be granted the Font of Knowledge. If you’re willing to help us beat Ehit, we need you to become king so we can gain access to it.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’ll go through the coronation ceremony. And

then, I'll immediately appoint someone else king."

"Huh?"

"In fact, you can take over if you want, Meiru. That way, I won't even have to explain what I know to you guys, Meiru can just do it instead. Plus, then my family won't be exposed to any danger. It's a win-win."

"You idiooooooooooooooot!" Morgan and Nevrai shouted at the same time. That woke Albanor up, but not for long. He made a few cooing noises, then nuzzled against his mother and fell asleep once more. It was pretty impressive that he could sleep through all this, honestly. However, Selene still shot Morgan and Nevrai a warning glance. No more screaming would be tolerated. Her gaze had a surprising amount of pressure behind it, so the two of them immediately apologized.

In a more hushed voice, Meiru asked, "Umm, would I even be able to pass the coronation ceremony? Sveit-kun couldn't."

"That's because he wasn't appointed by the previous king. That's one of the requirements the magic circle looks for."

In other words, if Alfard took the throne, then immediately appointed Sveit the next king, Sveit would likely be able to pass the trial. Though there hadn't ever been a precedent of someone who'd failed succeeding at a later date, so Alfard wasn't a hundred percent sure.

"The magic circle does check to see if you have the qualities of a ruler, but it's not looking for anything too special. A king is a single person, but a single person cannot protect a country on their own. To be a king, you must be someone others are willing to support."

Basically, the magic circle made sure the candidate wouldn't become a dictator. For example, it checked to see if the previous ruler had been coerced or brainwashed in some way to appoint someone as their successor, and whether or not that successor held any ill will toward their country.

"In the first place, I'd planned to let myself get found after a year or so and then appoint my brother the official successor."

"R-Really?" Morgan asked, and Alfard nodded.

"The reason I hid was because Selene was pregnant. It'd be pretty hard to keep a pregnant woman safe when there are assassins after her, right?"

"That...makes sense."

"Besides, I figured that after a year, my brother would work up the resolve to try to become king himself. He's a stubborn guy, but a hard worker as well."

Alfard had figured that after a year of fruitless searching, the vampire kingdom would finally think to try looking in the dangerous swamps within their territory. Instead, it had taken them a full two

years, and it hadn't even been the vampires who'd found him, but Miledi and the others.

"I thought my family might disown me for abandoning my royal duties, so I figured that was what had happened, and that they'd found a way to get the people to accept a king who hadn't cleared the coronation ceremony."

"Umm, Your Highness, normally, people wouldn't assume you'd taken your wife to the most dangerous place in the country to keep her safe."

"I mean, this is me we're talking about."

"Ngh, I hate that you have a point. Why didn't anyone think of that sooner?"

Of course, all of the vampire nobles had been in a panic because they'd lost their king and their crown prince, so they hadn't been thinking straight. Miledi thought back to how haggard Sveit and Anya had looked and smiled sadly, while Alfard simply shrugged.

"Anyway, the point is that it doesn't matter even if the magic circle doesn't accept you. We'll just tell the people Meiru managed to clear it. If they don't find out, the truth won't matter. Plus, that'll put us all in the same boat."

Alfard was literally trying to rope people into running a con.

Morgan and Nevrai shook their heads, saying things like, "Aaah, His Highness is about to do something crazy again!" and "But it always works out in the end, so I can't even argue back!"

Apparently, despite his spontaneous nature, Alfard always managed to make sure things worked out in the end.

"Hell, the whole reason I was searching for Meiru was so I could find proof of dad's secret relationship and use it as blackmail—I mean, use it to convince him to pick someone else."

"Y-You just said blackmail, didn't you?! You were gonna blackmail your own father?! Selene-san, please say something to him!"

"It's amazing how ruthless Al-sama is to his enemies."

"It's no use. Selene-san's blind when it comes to him. These two are a dangerous couple!"

While Miledi hung her head in despair, Meiru gave Alfard a thoughtful look.

"I assume you wanted to use me to blackmail your dad into picking a different successor? But you already knew my mother's name, so did you not hear that from my dad directly?"

"Oh yeah, I should tell you the whole story."

Apparently, Alfard had long suspected his father had once had an affair with a non-vampire woman. Alesand had been quite the skilled painter in his youth. He'd originally been very far down the line of succession and hadn't expected to ever become king, so he'd gone on a

trip around the world to find inspiration for his art. But then there was some trouble with the royal family, and he ended up next in line for the throne. After becoming king, he stopped painting entirely...and when asked why, he would always say that he'd run out of things he wished to draw. However, Alfard had been sharp enough to know his dad was lying. Moreover, he'd asked his mom about the real reason she'd acted rather suspicious, which got him thinking.

"Dad never really cared all that much about blood purity and stuff. Every time the other nobles asked him to be more active about preaching the values of blood purity, he'd always brush them off. That was around the time I started suspecting he might have had a non-vampire lover."

Alfard himself had fallen for a human woman, which was what got him thinking in that direction.

"I became sure of it when I told dad about Selene."

After he'd tried and failed thrice to persuade Alesand, Alfard had taken a risk and told his dad about Selene. He figured a scandal that big would convince his dad to rescind his declaration.

"I thought he might disown me then and there, but all dad said was, 'I see.' And, of course, he still kept me as his successor. In fact, I think he smiled a little when I told him. He was probably thinking 'like father, like son' or something. That was when I knew he'd probably fallen in love with someone from another race as well, and also when I started wondering whether or not he might have an illegitimate child. Unfortunately, Morgan and Nevrai went missing when I sent them to look for that child, and my attempts to find them failed."

"Hold on. Did you go looking for us personally, Your Highness?"

"Obviously. It was my selfishness that exposed you guys to danger. Besides, there was no way I was gonna abandon my friends."

Morgan and Nevrai looked like they wanted to hug Alfard, but also tell him not to risk his life like that at the same time.

"In the meantime, dad's condition grew a lot worse."

Alfard turned back to Miledi and the others as he continued his story.

"Even if dad did have an illegitimate child, I realized there was no way I was going to find them in time. But even if I couldn't convince my dad to change his mind, I still wanted to know how he'd felt about having a non-vampire lover."

After all, Alfard was soon going to be walking the same path his father once had. Alesand seemed to have wanted someone to open up to as well, so just before his death, he'd told Alfard about Reej.

"But he stubbornly refused to admit that he had a child with her."

"He probably wanted to respect Reej-san's wishes until the very

end. She'd distanced herself from him to protect Meru-nee, after all," Miledi said with a soft expression as she squeezed Meiru's hand. Meiru nodded in agreement. She was certain her father had distanced himself from her to protect her.

Alfard smiled at the two of them, then continued his story by saying, "Maybe he'd secretly hoped I'd change our society's values."

That was why Alfard had resolved to at least try to convince those around him of his and Selene's love. He told the vampire nobles he'd ascend the throne so long as they allowed him to marry Selene. However, the vampires had tried to kill Selene instead.

A heavy silence fell over the room...and eventually, Miledi timidly asked, "Umm, Prince Alfard? Both the queen and Prince Sveit said they regret not defending you. They want you to return so they can apologize in person. Of course, they're also now willing to accept Selene-san as your wife."

"I see... So my brother's finally..."

Alfard was momentarily overcome by emotion. Of course, he still hadn't fully forgiven his brother for standing back and allowing the nobles to carry out their assassination plot, but he also knew his actions had put Sveit in a difficult position.

"Al-sama," Selene said, squeezing Alfard's hand. He looked up to see his wife smiling gently at him. "They didn't refuse to act out of malice."

Just because they'd stood by, it didn't mean that Sveit and Anya had approved of Selene's murder.

"Both your mother and Onii-sama are your precious family, right? I'm sure it'll be fine."

"Yeah, you're right..." Alfard mumbled as he squeezed Selene's hand back and kissed her and his son on the forehead. "But even so, I won't become king."

Selene gave him a reprimanding look in response. Alfard looked away awkwardly, turning back to Miledi.

"Anyway, let's hurry. We need to get the information you Liberators need as soon as possible."

He rose to his feet, pointedly refusing to meet his wife's gaze.

That same night, Miledi and the others waited with bated breath in the palace's basement. Selene, Albanor, Morgan, Nevrai, Anya, and Sveit were there with them. They'd made their way through a maze-like series of turns and come out in a wide room that was ten floors beneath the palace entrance.

A group of golems meant to keep out anyone who hadn't been chosen by the previous king had appeared to stop the intruders, but Alfard had just finished destroying them all. He then struck a victory

pose for his son and Albanor gurgled happily.

Beyond this room was the Trial Chamber. Normally, the ceremony was only supposed to happen after the various noble families had been summoned and the people had been given advance notice, but this time around, it was being held with only Alfard's family and the Liberators in attendance. After all, if word got out that Selene and Albanor were here, it would cause quite a stir, and if Miledi and the others were busy dealing with racist nobles, they wouldn't be able to get the information they needed. Luckily, Alfard had at least managed to reconcile with his family. The fact that Albanor was resting happily in Anya's arms was proof of that.

Incidentally, Albanor seemed quite obsessed with Anya's cheeks. Even as he was calling out to his father, his hands were poking and prodding the queen's porcelain face. He was probably trying to point out how cool his dad was to Anya, and Anya was happily telling Albanor all about how amazing Alfard was. Though she hadn't actually seen Alfard fight, since she'd had eyes only for Albanor ever since she'd picked him up. Sveit had no kids of his own, and Anya was so overjoyed about finally having grandkids that she didn't care that her first grandson was a half-blood.

"I never knew mother could make such gentle expressions..." Sveit said, looking surprised.

Meanwhile, Alfard opened the steel door leading into the Trial Chamber and stepped inside. The Trial Chamber was a circular room, and the moment Alfard entered, the jewels ensconced into the walls lit up, illuminating the extremely complex magic circle in the room's center.

"Looks like that's it," Alfard said as he stepped into the circle without hesitation.

It looked like Sveit wanted to lecture his younger brother for not acting with proper decorum during such an important event, so Morgan and Nevrai gave Sveit sympathetic looks.

"Woow! Mama, pwetty!"

"Oh, you think daddy looks pretty too, don't you, Albanor?"

"Papa pwetty!"

"He he he... Thanks, Albanor."

"Umm, mother? I think Albanor's talking about the ceremony, not Al-sama himself," Selene said hesitantly, bringing Anya back to her senses.

Miledi and the others also looked suitably impressed as the magic circle activated. The glowing spiral of light surrounding Alfard and the motes of light filling the room really did look beautiful.

The magic circle glowed blindingly bright, and then a second later, a pillar of light shot up, going straight through the stone roof

and bathing the room in light. Alfard really did look majestic, standing in the middle of all that shimmering light. He looked like a true king.

Outside, people saw the pillar of light shooting up from the palace, informing everyone that Dastia had a new king.

Eventually, the light began to fade and Alfard slowly opened his eyes. While the light from the circle had faded, Alfard himself was still wreathed in an aura of light and Morgan and Nevrai knelt before him.

Anya looked moved, while Sveit looked like he'd finally been freed from a burden he'd never wanted to carry.

"So, which of you wants to succeed me?" Alfard asked, looking from Meiru to Sveit. Even Miledi and the others had been a little moved by the birth of Dastia's new king, but said new king didn't seem to find this moment momentous in the slightest. He really was uninterested in being king.

Upon realizing that, Anya looked down, while Sveit frowned.

"I'll let Miledi-chan decide. What do you say, leader? Do we need the vampires behind us?"

"Nope," Miledi said, looking at Alfard instead of Meiru.

"All we need is knowledge of how to beat Ehit."

Miledi was making it clear that she wouldn't saddle Meiru with the responsibility of leading Dastia.

"Besides, you'd have to be insane to hand a country over to Merunee of all people," Miledi added.

"Miledi-chan?"

"Good point. I agree completely," Alfard replied.

"Hey, you wanna go? I'll teach you to show your older sister some respect."

Meiru gripped the hilt of her saber, but Laus and Vandre quickly pinned her down before she could start a fight.

"I guess that means you've gotta be the next king—"

"Hold on!" Sveit said before Alfard could finish.

"You're our king, Alfard."

"But you're more suited to being king, brother. I mean, isn't that exactly what you said back when dad picked me?"

"Over these past two years—" Sveit choked up a little, his eyes filled with regret and guilt as he looked up at Alfard. "Over these past two years, I've learned that I'm not fit to be king."

"That's not—"

"Oh, it's true all right, Alfard. I know now that I'm far too weak to be king."

No matter what happened, Alfard never wavered. Peer pressure couldn't sway him. He was absolutely sure of himself, and once he set his mind to something, he resolved to see it through. Plus, despite

being seen as an oddball, every time he went out into the city, he left the people smiling and happy.

That was the kind of man Alfard II Dastia was. He wasn't just strong when it came to fighting, he was mentally strong as well...and it was that strength of his that drew people to him.

Sveit didn't have that. He couldn't reassure the people the way Alfard could. Even if Sveit passed the trial and the light shot up to confirm him as the new king, the people would still see the throne as empty.

"I used to think I'd be able to understand everything if I just studied enough. I looked down on you for neglecting your studies. But I was wrong. It wasn't book smarts that I needed. What I lacked the most was real life experience. On the other hand, you've learned everything you need. I misjudged you," Sveit said with a shrug of his shoulders.

"You weren't wrong, you just took everything too seriously. I know no one who loves their country as much as you do, and no one with a greater sense of responsibility."

Sveit looked up and was surprised to see Alfard smiling self-deprecatingly.

"I chose my wife over the rest of the country. I'm not like dad. I can't give up Selene and Albanor for the sake of my people."

That, more than anything else, was proof that Alfard wasn't fit to be king.

"I don't deserve to be part of the royal family," Alfard stated clearly. He then turned to Morgan and Nevrai and said, "I'm sorry, but I'm not someone worthy of your loyalty. I won't blame you if you're disappointed in me, but I'd hate to lose your friendship."

"Don't be stupid, Your Majesty. We never respected you enough to be disappointed now."

"You guys sure got cocky in the time you were gone."

At first Morgan and Nevrai had wanted to persuade Alfard to stay king, but after seeing the way he looked at his wife and son, they gave up. Anya didn't protest either, while Miledi and the others exchanged glances. They weren't sure this was the best solution, but they also knew it wasn't their place to interfere in foreign politics.

"Anyway, I've kept you Liberators waiting long enough. Let's—"

"Are you sure this is what you truly want?" Selene asked suddenly, her voice reverberating through the room. She then walked over to where Anya was and held her hands out. Anya obediently handed Albanor back to Selene, as if obeying her was the most natural thing in the world.

Selene hugged her son close, then walked regally over to Alfard, looking more like royalty than anyone else, and said, "Thank you so

much for loving us, Al-sama. You've made us the two happiest people in the world."

Selene smiled, and in that moment she didn't look anything like a simple village girl.

"Don't tell me..." Alfard muttered, worried that Selene would choose to leave the way Meiru's mother had. However, Selene truly was a woman worthy of being this unruly prince's wife.

"But if you're going to make such a pathetic face, I'd rather you didn't love me at all."

"Selene..."

Selene had straight up told him not to use her as an excuse to run away from his responsibilities.

"We're all important to you, aren't we?"

By all, Selene of course meant Sveit and Anya, but also the rest of Dastia's people. If Alfard truly hadn't cared at all about Dastia, he wouldn't have stayed within its borders after Selene had nearly been assassinated. He'd stuck around so he could at least make sure his older brother securely ascended the throne.

"I'm weak and can't survive without your protection, so maybe it's selfish of me to say this, but..." Selene trailed off as she snuggled up next to Alfard. "I don't want you to abandon something important to you for our sake. After all, we love you just as much as you love us. So with that in mind, I'll ask you again... Are you sure this is what you want?"

"....."

Selene's unwavering gaze was too much for Alfard, so he turned to look at the ceiling. Sveit walked over and placed a hand on Alfard's shoulder. Though he said nothing, his expression made it clear that he'd support Alfard through anything and everything. Anya also gave Alfard a gentle look, tipping the scales a little bit more in Selene's favor.

"So long as you protect us and we support you, I'm sure this country will be just fine, Al-sama," Selene said with a smile, giving Alfard the final push that he needed.

On that day, the people of Dastia learned of Alfard's return, as well as the fact that he had become their new king. Naturally, the vampire nobles were furious that he'd had a child with Selene, but to everyone's surprise, most of the commoners were perfectly fine with having a human queen and a half-vampire prince. Why, they even gave Alfard their blessings. Because Alfard had spent so much of his time in the city, the people knew what kind of person he was, and during his absence, they'd been given a stark reminder of how much they needed him. Plus, the fact that Sveit and Anya had accepted Alfard and Selene's marriage made it easier for the common folk to as

well. And of course, the humans of Dastia were overjoyed.

On the eve of Alfard's coronation, Selene and Alfard both gave a speech to the crowd gathered at the palace.

"You're welcome to try and assassinate me, but just know that if I or my son die, my husband will go berserk. You better be ready to see this country burn if you kill me."

"That's right. I'll become your king if that's what you want, but if you touch my wife or my son, then I'll reduce Dastia to ash."

That speech was enough to convince the commoners to keep an eye on the nobles and make sure they didn't try anything stupid. Moreover, that speech also showed everyone just how much presence Queen Selene had. No one could understand how she'd been just a simple village girl before.

At around the same time that Dastia's new king was being crowned, a large crowd had gathered at the remains of the Divine Cathedral in the theocracy.

Against the backdrop of the setting sun, a timid priest addressed a robed woman standing where the entrance to the cathedral's shrine had once been.

"Y-Your Eminence."

The woman turned around. She had once been Lelei Argeson, one of the Holy Templar Knights' captains, but now she was the pope and called herself Darrion Kaus.

"We've finished the measurements," the priest said. He was talking about the measurements needed to start reconstructing the cathedral. The crowd gathered behind him was full of the carpenters and masons and so on that would be needed to rebuild, and they all looked like they were just as confused as the priest that Darrion was their new pope.

"Good. Have our visitors returned to their home countries?"

"That's what the reports say, Your Eminence."

"The city and the palace have been mostly repaired. It's time for the final stage of cleanup."

"Umm, Your Eminence..." the priest trailed off awkwardly, prompting Darrion to cock her head at him. "I know that rebuilding the cathedral is a very important task, but..."

"You're wondering what I intend to do about the heretics, aren't you?"

"That, and the distrust the rest of the world...and even our own citizens, have for the church now."

Since becoming pope, all Darrion had done was clean up the aftermath of the church's battle with the Liberators. No one could understand why she was calling herself Darrion now either. Plus,

despite their faith, many priests and bishops were still unhappy that the apostle had chosen her to be the new pope. They didn't like that a mere knight had been picked over the higher-ranking members of the clergy. The priest talking to Darrion right now was also one such person.

Darrion smiled down at him and stated, "I told you, we're moving into the final stage of cleanup."

The priest gave her a confused look, but Darrion simply turned her back to him and raised a hand in the air.

A second later, the same silver vortex everyone had seen the day of the decisive battle appeared in the air. A ripple of unease spread through the crowd, and a few people fell to their knees. Darrion ignored them all, however, and narrowed her eyes, looking off into the distance.

"This shall be the final act. Do your best to give my lord an entertaining struggle, you pitiful pawns," she muttered. Her words were drowned out by the screams of fear and joy of the people as they watched a silver meteor shower descend onto Tortus.

"Wait, are you saying Darrion Kaus is the first generation's hero?" Miledi asked, her confused voice echoing through the new king of Dastia's bedroom. The room had been completely soundproofed, and the only people inside were Alfard and Miledi and her comrades.

"I don't know if this Darrion is the same one, seeing as the original lived thousands of years ago, but according to the Font of Knowledge, Darrion Kaus was the name of the young man who became the world's first hero. Moreover, he had the power to split his soul and transfer it into other bodies, granting him pseudo-immortality."

If that was true, then Darrion had most likely always been the leader of the Paladins. It seemed tracing the clues they'd found in the Dragon Kingdom had unearthed some truly shocking information.

Apparently, that fairy tale hadn't been just a fairy tale. The hero of that story had been none other than Darrion himself, and the Demon Lord he'd fought had been Ehit. Moreover, the "sanctuary" Darrion had been protecting had indeed been the Pale Forest. Or, to be more specific, the sacred tree, Uralt. No, actually, even that wasn't quite right.

"He tried to protect the goddess Uralt, the avatar of the sacred tree. Her soul then came to reside within the Holy Sword and she fought against the evil god Ehit alongside the hero. To think that I, the queen of the forest, was ignorant of such a legend. How embarrassing," Lyutillis said with a sigh.

"But isn't that weird?" Oscar asked.

“Yeah. If this Darrion is the same as the original, then why is he one of Ehit’s knights now?” Naiz asked, his expression grim. It was Meiru who answered that particular question.

“Isn’t it because he cares about the goddess?”

“What do you mean, Meru-nee?”

“I mean, just think about it. Darrion fought against Ehit, but he’s still alive and kicking.”

It was at that point that everyone realized how the fairy tale must have ended. Darrion had realized he couldn’t defeat Ehit, but he didn’t want to lose Uralt, whose soul was now sealed within the Holy Sword, so his only option had been to switch sides. Even if that meant betraying the world, as well as his beloved goddess, he had to do it.

Vandre looked down and muttered, “Nothing shall despoil this sanctuary,’ huh?”

That had undoubtedly been the hero’s soul screaming out to protect his beloved goddess, who he cared for more than the world itself.

Laus turned to Alfard with a strange expression on his face and asked, “Your Majesty, please tell us. What was the true nature of that multicolored barrier the first hero created with nothing but force of will? What does it mean to convert your willpower into magic?”

The answer to that was the key to beating Ehit. It was what Miledi and the others had come to Dastia to learn. The Liberators stiffened, nervously awaiting Alfard’s answer.

Alfard looked pretty nervous himself, and he took a deep breath before saying in a solemn voice, “Concept magic.”

The long, unbroken history of the vampire race had finally granted the Liberators a single ray of hope.

“Concept magic...?” Miledi repeated, chewing over the words. It sounded like she’d just gotten her hands on an unbelievable treasure.

Alfard nodded, then went on to explain the specifics. Though honestly, those specifics were still rather vague.

“You guys have already fulfilled the conditions necessary to use concept magic.”

According to Alfard, concept magic quite literally allowed someone to materialize concepts into physical reality. There were no rules, no restrictions to what could be done with it. It truly was the ultimate type of magic. But in order to use concept magic, a person needed to interact with the seven fundamental rules of the universe, understand them intimately, and possess a massive amount of mana. And then, they needed a final key that was so difficult to grasp that the secrets of concept magic had been lost to time.

“All you guys need now is an unbelievably powerful will.”

“An unbelievably powerful will...?” Miledi repeated, staring at

Alfard. She was hoping he'd give her something more concrete to work with than that. However, as the silence stretched on, cold sweat started to pour down all the Liberators' foreheads.

Hoping she'd misheard, Miledi looked off to the side and asked in a timid voice, "Did you say an unbelievably powerful mill?"

"Will."

Alfard's answer didn't change.

Miledi couldn't take it anymore, so she exclaimed, "That's way too vague! What kinda bullshit explanation is that?!"

"I don't know! Don't blame me though, that's all there is in the Font of Knowledge!"

Oscar and the others voiced their complaints as well.

"Now hang on here, surely there's at least a *few* more specifics!"

"Come on, Alfard! I know you can squeeze something more out of that shitty Font of Knowledge!"

"Yeah! Maybe there's something in the corner of your mind that you just didn't notice before or something!"

"Maybe a good whack to the head will jog your memory?!"

"Nice idea, Naiz! Let's try that!"

"All right, Van, hold him down. I'll hit him with a Soul Shock as well for good measure!"

"S-Stop! What are you trying to do to me?! Guards! Guaaards!"

The Liberators had found the answer they were seeking, so they now knew there was a way to defeat Ehit. Unfortunately, that method was so vague that they didn't even know where to begin. Miledi and the others had had high hopes coming here, and while they hadn't exactly been dashed, they'd been dampened enough that they went on a rampage throughout the palace to vent their frustrations.

A week had passed since their discovery of concept magic. During that time, Miledi and the others had stayed holed up in their room. They'd told everyone not to disturb them, and they were having the palace maids take care of their meals and laundry while they tried to master concept magic.

"Nnnrrrrrrrrgh!"

"Shit, Miledi's going berserk again!"

"Lau-chan-san! She needs a Soul's Repose!"

"How long do we have to keep at this? Does Sharm even remember me now? What if he hates me too? If I lose Sharm as well, I'll lose all my will to live. I'll never be able to repair my broken family and—"

"Oh no, he's broken down too!"

"Naiz, teleport Miledi away from here! Meiru's curled up inside her bed and won't come out!"

So far, they hadn't been able to activate it even once. They'd tried meditating, using restoration magic to relive past tragedies and rile themselves up, and had even used spirit magic to manipulate their emotions. Oscar had prepared a bunch of artifacts to try to imbue with concept magic if they ever managed to get it working as well, but despite their best efforts and the combined might of all of their mana, the seven of them just couldn't seem to get concept magic working.

They wanted to find a way into Ehit's domain, or a way to drag him down to Tortus, as well as a way to kill him. However, every time their attempts fizzled out, it felt like they were being told their desire to destroy him wasn't strong enough, which was a lot more mentally taxing than they'd initially expected.

Just as they were about to reach their limits, Alfard, Selene, and Albanor walked into the room.

"Looks like you guys still haven't had any luck..." Alfard said as he glanced across the room.

"Miledi-san, are you okay?" Selene asked worriedly.

"Dummy," Albanor said with a dopey smile.

"Who're you calling a dummy?!" Miledi shouted.

"Miledi, stop! Are you seriously going to pick a fight with a baby?!"

For his part, Albanor seemed quite happy with all the attention. Selene gently rebuked him for calling Miledi a dummy, while Alfard simply grinned.

"What did you guys come here for? Did you just want to show off your happy family to me and make fun of me for destroying my own?"

"Laus, calm down. You're getting too obsessed."

Laus had continually relived his memories of the time Kaime and Selm had first come to kill him to try to hone his will, but it seemed he'd been reliving those memories a bit too much. Now seeing other happy families was anathema to him. He hugged his knees and curled up into a fetal position while Naiz gently rubbed his back.

"I heard from the maids that you guys are having trouble making any progress, so I came to invite you to dinner for a change of pace."

"It won't be anything formal, just a small dinner party. Hopefully, the food and wine will help you all relax a little."

Oscar and the others exchanged glances. It certainly was true that they'd started unraveling over the past few days...especially Miledi. They were, of course, in a hurry, but they also knew getting impatient would just slow them down.

"Miledi," Oscar said in a gentle voice.

Miledi let out a small groan, then tore at her already messy hair to vent and said, "Thanks for the invitation."

She too had realized that they needed a break.

Later that night, the Liberators got drunk off their asses.

“You fucking bastard. Quit hiding up there in the clouds and come down to fight us! You that scared of me, huh?!”

“He’s just a washed-up shitty hermit. We’ve got tons of them back in the slums!”

“Only a perverted creep surrounds himself with a bunch of identical dolls. I bet Ehit got bullied as a kid!”

“He plays all of his games by himself too! He’s an even bigger loner than I was, Onee-sama! I almost pity him! He he he!”

“Goddamn shut-in! We’re gonna break into your stupid domain and beat the shit out of you, just you wait!”

“You said it, Naiz! No way we’re letting that bastard escape. No matter where he is, we’re gonna find him so I can make him pay for ripping my family apart.”

“Where’s Alfaaard. I need to make sure he records the moment that self-styled god kneels to us and begs for mercy in his Font of Knowledge.”

At first they’d avoided drinking too much, since they knew this was no time to be cutting loose, but once they’d gotten a little tipsy, they’d let themselves go completely. It hadn’t been too bad at the start. Miledi had just started fawning over Oscar, while Meiru had kept on pestering Naiz. Naiz had, of course, ignored her entirely and focused on stopping Oscar from taking things too far with Miledi. Meanwhile, Lyutillis had gone full pervert mode, Laus had broken down in tears over his family, and Vandre had started talking to the wall.

Still, while they’d been pretty drunk, at least they hadn’t been causing problems for other people. Alfard and the others had found that version of the drunk Liberators kind of cute, honestly.

Miledi and the others had been under a lot of pressure to save the world, and they’d been understandably stressed out, so it wasn’t too surprising that eventually they’d start to vent.

Before long, their eyes started to glaze over and they began insulting Ehit in every way they knew how. If they’d just been shouting it wouldn’t have been too bad, but they started casting offensive magic in their drunken stupor as well. No one could stop them either, or they’d risk getting dragged into the danger zone.

In the end, Alfard had cast a barrier around all of them and then taken his family out of the room. Miledi and the others didn’t even notice that he’d departed, and were continuing to guzzle down alcohol as they gazed up at the stars through the hole in the ceiling that they’d made. They’d destroyed the walls as well.

That night, the people of Dastia watched on in fear as seven pillars of light even brighter than the one that had shot up when

Alfard had been appointed king rose from the palace.

“Die, Ehit, you fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck!” Miledi and the others roared in unison, their voices echoing throughout the entire city.



The next morning, Alfard opened the door to the dining hall with great trepidation. He eased it open as slowly as possible, looking as though he was about to step into the lair of a deadly beast. But while the room itself looked like it had been hit by a dozen tornadoes in quick succession, the Liberators were sitting quietly in a circle on the floor, seemingly at peace.

“Wh-What happened?” he asked hesitantly.

Miledi gave him a conflicted smile and muttered, “W-We did it.”

Alfard’s expression stiffened and he asked in a serious voice, “You’re pregnant with Oscar’s child?”

“Aasllkgjsalgajiu?! No!”

Blushing furiously, Miledi explained that they’d finally succeeded in creating things with concept magic. They’d managed to create multiple trump cards against Ehit...all while completely wasted.

The first thing they’d made was the Godslayer Dagger. It was a small, twenty-centimeter-long dagger with a sky-blue blade imbued with the power to kill gods. The second thing they’d created was the Compass of Eternal Paths. It looked more like a pocket watch with just one needle than a compass, but the concept magic it was imbued with pointed the needle to whatever the user desired most. Finally, the last thing they’d created was the Arrow of Boundaries. It was an arrow made of black quartz, and it was imbued with concept magic that allowed it to destroy any and all boundaries.

“That’s amazing,” Alfard said when Miledi explained what all the objects they’d made did. He was guiding the group to the cliffs that marked Dastia’s border as the conversation unfolded.

“Umm...thanks,” Miledi replied, sounding surprisingly meek. Normally, she’d have been boasting about their accomplishment and generally being a nuisance. However, no one called Miledi out on her strange behavior. Mostly because Oscar and the others were similarly subdued, honestly.

“I guess I’ll make sure to record that the best way to forge an unbelievably powerful will is to get unbelievably drunk.”

“Please don’t!” Miledi exclaimed in a panic. She didn’t want her shame to be recorded forever in history.

Alfard burst out laughing, and Selene, Anya, and Sveit, who’d also come to see the group off, chuckled.

“A-Anyway, please take this!” Miledi said, holding a Treasure Trove out to Alfard. Oscar had made it for him as a token of his thanks. He’d also stuffed it full of unique artifacts, including one he’d made in the process of creating the concept magic artifacts that defended against Ehit’s power of compulsion. That ability had actually been recorded in the Font of Knowledge, and the group now knew

that spell was called Divine Edict.

“Hm... And you say this artifact is called ‘Sorry? Couldn’t hear you, dumbass?’” Alfard asked as Oscar told him about all the artifacts in the Treasure Trove.

“I’m sorry about Miledi’s awful naming sense.”

“Are you mad that we always make fun of your naming sense, O-kun?”

While the group was talking, Albanor—who’d been in Selene’s arms—finally woke up, so Miledi and the others decided to take that as their cue to leave.

Miledi held out a hand to Alfard and said, “Thank you so much for everything.”

“If anything, I should be the one thanking you,” he replied as he shook her hand and gave her a beaming smile. “I have faith that you seven will do what’s best for the world.”

Miledi blinked in surprise upon hearing that, then smiled back at Alfard.

“Now then, we need to get back and tell everyone the good news. Mwa ha ha ha!” Miledi cackled, twirling happily as she flew through the air. She was in a good mood now that they’d finally obtained the power to resist Ehit, and her fighting spirit was burning brighter than ever. Accelerating rapidly, she led the group out of the Azure Lands in the blink of an eye. Then, as soon as they were out of the swamp, she activated her Skynet.

“Hmm? It doesn’t seem to be connecting properly. Lyu-chan, is something wrong?”

“My evolution magic is working perfectly fine, so it shouldn’t be that.”

Miledi had initially thought the Skynet didn’t have enough juice to transmit its signals, but after learning that wasn’t the case, she turned to Vandre.

“My brother should still be at the fortress at the front lines...but maybe he was forced to move?”

Rasul should have been the closest to Miledi and the others, but her Skynet didn’t seem to be connecting to his at all.

“O-kun, look for him with the compass.”

Oscar nodded and activated the compass, fixing Rasul firmly in his mind.

“Looks like Rasul’s traveling east along the gorge... Wait, is he planning on returning to the north?”

“What, with his entire army? He didn’t leave anyone behind to serve as a liaison or anything?”

“One sec, I’ll try searching for his troops... Hmm, it looks like

they're here. They're at a fortress that's a thousand kilometers to the northeast. But...this is weird. The image is fuzzy. It's almost like they're scattered."

A chill ran down Oscar's spine. He had a bad feeling about this.

"Let's go. It'll be faster to just head there directly. Plus, the Skynet at the fortress has a much bigger range than ours," Miledi replied.

"That's true. With my evolution magic, we should be able to reach Shandra or even Velnika with the Skynet there."

Miledi and the others nodded to each other, then rushed off toward the fortress.

"What happened here...?"

Upon arriving, they found a shattered fort littered with corpses. The demon army had been slaughtered.

"Meru-nee! Lau-chan!"

"I know, I know!"

"On it!"

Meiru and Laus hurried down to the fortress. Laus then used spirit magic to try to search for any survivors, but—

"Fuck," he whispered as he realized there wasn't a single person left alive in the fortress.

In the meantime, Miledi and the others ran straight toward the room that housed the Skynet. That room had originally been the fortress's command room, so it had the strongest defenses placed around it. A few survivors might have holed up in there.

"The door..."

Everyone paled when they saw that the door to the command room was wide open. The walls were caked with dried blood and the stench of death wafted out from the open door. A few days had passed since this massacre, clearly.

Upon seeing one of the corpses, Vandre's chest tightened and he murmured, "No...General Elga..."

He walked over to the old general, whose body was against the wall, lifeless, and crumpled to his knees. He then stared blankly at Elga's corpse, looking like he'd been hit over the head with a hammer. Miledi and the others appeared just as shocked.

"The Skynet's broken...but..."

Biting his lip, Oscar nevertheless forced himself into action. His glasses had picked up trace amounts of mana remaining in one corner of the wall...and upon closer inspection, he saw that someone had shoddily buried something with earth magic. He transmuted the earth away, revealing a smaller, portable Skynet.

"It was set to record..."

Oscar had upgraded the Skynets to have recording capabilities so that the Liberators would be able to show future generations the day

of the decisive battle.

Miledi and the others hurried over as Oscar played back the recording.

“I pray that you find this recording, my princess.”

Rasul appeared on the Skynet’s small, twenty-centimeter screen. He didn’t have the playful smile he usually did. In fact, he looked grimmer than he ever had. The sounds of battle and Lestina’s shouting could be heard in the distance.

“The world has gone mad.”

Miledi and the others narrowed their eyes in worry upon hearing that.

“Or rather, it is Ehit who’s driven it mad. All the countries around the world have started hunting the Liberators. Armies are mobilizing and the common people have turned against us. Why, even the children and the elderly have been trapped in a crucible of fanatical zeal!”

Laus and Meiru entered the room, looking defeated, just in time to hear that last sentence.

“Huh? What’s he saying? I don’t...” Miledi trailed off, shaking her head.

Rasul’s voice grew harsher, almost as if he was scolding her to get a grip as he said, “I don’t know when this message will reach you, but you must hurry! You must rescue as many survivors as possible...before all is lost!”

Tears spilled from Miledi’s eyes, while Oscar and the others went as white as sheets. They now understood the true nature of the final game Ehit had prepared for them.

Chapter IV: The End of the World

Five days ago, when Miledi and the others were still in Dastia, the world came to an abrupt end.

In Uldea's capital, Damdrak, two figures illuminated by the unnaturally crimson full moon walked down an alleyway.

"What's with this strange atmosphere?"

"I know, right? It's way too quiet."

Chris and Kyaty sniffed at the air, their faces covered by deep hoods. After escaping from the capital, the pirate crew had fled to the Liberator village hidden in the mountains northwest of Damdrak. Supporters within the capital had been keeping them apprised of the situation within the city ever since, and a few days ago, they'd gotten a report simply stating, "Something in the city feels off."

Everyone had seen the Liberators' battle with the church via the Skynets, so the city had been quite noisy in the following days. People had been suspicious and afraid of the church, and more than a few had been moved by Miledi's heartfelt speech. They were beginning to question their faith in Ehit, which was something that would have been unthinkable before. However, now there was open talk about whether or not Ehit was worthy of worship. Members of the clergy weren't able to put a stop to such heretical talk, and were, in fact, holed up within Damdrak's church for fear of retribution. And yet, now the tumult had died down and the streets were eerily quiet. Even the breeze, which blew almost constantly over from the lake, had vanished.

There was definitely something weird going on. To Chris, it almost seemed like the calm before the storm.

"For now, let's just make sure everyone's safe."

"Yeah. Who knows, maybe they'll have some new info for us."

The reason Chris and Kyaty were here was because they hadn't received their scheduled report from their supporters in the city.

The two of them tamped down on their growing unease, nodded to each other, and walked out of the alleyway. They chose as discreet a route as they could, though there was little need considering how deserted the streets were. The usual sounds of life one would expect from a bustling population center were nowhere to be found. It was almost as if the city itself was holding its breath.

They reached their destination, a building that provided ferry

services around the city, with surprising ease. Circling around to the back, they gave the coded knock to let the people inside know Liberators were here. There was no response though, and Chris couldn't sense any people inside. Plus, the windows and curtains were closed, making it impossible to see inside. The lights were off as well, and were this a normal day, Chris would have just assumed the owners were out.

"Did they...change bases, maybe?" Chris wondered aloud.

"Without contacting us first? Even if they had to leave in a hurry, they'd have at least left behind clues to their new location."

"Good point," Chris replied, then tried the door and discovered that it wasn't locked. Alarm bells started ringing in his head. His gut told him to run, but he had to know what had happened to his comrades. He exchanged a worried glance with Kyaty, then steeled his resolve and pushed the door open.

Kyaty's expression stiffened the moment the door opened.

"I smell blood," she said, prompting Chris to click his tongue in frustration.

The two of them dashed in and found tragedy waiting for them. Everyone in the building had been slaughtered. Blood splattered the floor and walls, and the corpses had all been heaped into a pile in the center of the living room. None of the Liberators had managed to escape.

A crowd of flies buzzed around the corpses. These people had been dead for at least two days now. However, it was how they'd been killed that caught Chris's attention first.

"They were all...beaten to death?"

It didn't look like they'd been bludgeoned by the kinds of warhammers that knights occasionally used either. It looked more like they'd been smacked over and over by people who clearly had no martial skill. It was almost as if—

"They were ganged up on by amateurs?"

Their injuries resembled those of Andika's residents after they'd gotten into a bar fight or a back alley scuffle. They'd been showered with blows from canes and crude cudgels, and whoever had been wielding those makeshift weapons had no experience in real fights.

The whole thing made no sense. Burglars wouldn't have gone out of their way to kill everyone, but this whole assault looked too amateurish to be the work of knights.

"Chris! I don't like this... Something's coming!"

Kyaty's warning broke Chris out of his musings, and he suddenly realized that they were surrounded. He could sense bloodlust from outside the windows.

"Oh man, you've gotta be kidding me."

The people staring into the building with bloodshot eyes were...just regular civilians.

Kyaty took an involuntary step backward, overwhelmed by the unnatural amount of hatred oozing from them.

“Kyaty, go up!”

Chris drew the sword on his back and sliced up at the ceiling. He created a small hole in the three-story building’s roof, and the two of them leaped up through the opening. But as they saw what was happening around them, they stiffened.

“What the...? What’s going on?” Kyaty asked in a trembling voice.

Chris had no answer for her. Cold sweat poured down his back and his throat tightened up. This had to be a nightmare. The streets were filled with people, as far as the eye could see. All of them, young and old, men and women, were holding makeshift weapons in their hands.

As the crowd advanced on the ferry building, a few people tripped and fell, but no one paid them any mind and the crowd just trampled over them. They all chanted, “Kill the mavericks!” in unison. Everyone in the capital had gone completely insane.

“Can you hear me, Chris-san, Kyaty-san?! Are you two okay?!”

The two of them heard a girl’s worried voice in their ears, knocking them out of their stupor.

“Diene, what’s wrong?!” Chris asked as the two of them jumped from roof to roof, avoiding the hordes of people that spilled out of balconies or tried to jump at them from the roofs of nearby buildings. Some people missed their jumps and fell, but no one seemed to care.

Diene breathed a sigh of relief upon getting a reply, then explained in a tense voice, “The dukedom’s armies have entered the mountains. They know where our hidden village is too. We’re evacuating, but there are far too many soldiers here. It’s only a matter of time before they hunt us down.”

“Even the army’s on the move? Shit, so that’s what you were scheming?!”

Chris immediately realized that this was Ehit’s final game.

“Keep running for now! If things get bad, execute the contingency escape plan!”

“What about you and Kyaty?”

“We’re going to check on the Skynet in the city. Our portable ones don’t have the range to contact the branches in other countries.”

Chris told Diene what was happening in the capital, and she was left momentarily speechless. Finally, she said in a trembling voice, “All right. We’re taking the village’s Dark Gate with us. Get out of there as soon as you can.”

“You bet we will. Take care of the rest of the pirate crew while

we're gone."

With that, Chris ended the transmission.

Kyaty, who had been knocking down magic missiles and arrows as they leaped across the city rooftops, asked, "Hey, Chris, this is the only place this is happening, right?"

"Who knows? I really hope that's the case, though."

Not all hidden villages had Dark Keys, nor did every member of the combat division. Many of them were still recovering from their wounds, and most of them had lost the protection of their artifacts like the Metal Batlams.

Both regular civilians and professional soldiers had been doubting Ehit just a few days ago, but now they'd become crazed believers who appeared to want nothing more than the destruction of all heretics. Chris hadn't seen this coming at all. If something like this was happening all over the world, then the Liberators really were doomed.

"Anyway, we need to contact the other branches. And if it turns out that's impossible, then we need to get out of here!"

"Yeah, you're right. We've gotta protect our little princess until our captain returns!"

Forcing themselves to focus on the task at hand, Chris and Kyaty dived into the sea of crazed people. They didn't even stop to consider the possibility that the wave of crazed religious zeal might have affected the Liberators' own members.

In the Odion Federation, the Liberator village in the mountains was facing a similar crisis.

"All of the federation member states are mobilizing their armies? Do we have any idea why?" Sim asked, his voice echoing throughout the makeshift pavilion that had been set up in an empty plot in the village.

All of the other beastmen generals were in the tent as well, and it was Nirke who replied, saying, "I'm afraid not. Our support branches have all told us that things are normal in the cities."

"They're not trying to suppress the new groups that popped up in support of the Liberators...are they?"

"It doesn't seem so. They're just all heading east."

Sim had been receiving reports that numerous groups had started appearing within the federation that had come out in support of the Liberators. He wouldn't have been surprised if the church had petitioned the federation's leaders to mobilize their armies to stamp them out, but it seemed that wasn't the case.

"Hmm... I doubt they're planning to launch a second invasion of the Pale Forest, but..."

Sim couldn't figure out what the federation's intention was, which

bugged him.

Everyone else looked similarly confused, and an uneasy silence settled over the tent.

Suddenly, a cheerful voice interrupted the meeting, saying, "Everyone, I've brought you some food! Can I come in?"

"Oh, is it already that late? You can come in!"

A young woman in her midtwenties pushed aside the tent flap and walked in. She had originally been a nun, but when she'd reported a priest's misconduct to the church, she and her family had been branded heretics. She had been about to be executed when the Liberators had saved her. She was a gentle woman with a motherly demeanor, and all of the village's kids loved her. She was carrying a basket that was giving off a delectable smell.

"Thanks for always making us food."

"Oh, it's nothing, really. I just want to do what I can to help."

As she started deftly handing out food to everyone, Sim smiled. She didn't despise beastmen the way most humans did, nor did it look like she was forcing herself to be friendly with any of them. She simply treated Sim and the others like she would anyone else. The fact that they were from a different race didn't bother her at all. Sim truly hoped from the bottom of his heart that the day would eventually come when everyone in the world was as open-minded as her.

"Oh yeah, you went into town yesterday to buy groceries, right?"

For just a moment, the woman's hands stopped, but then she replied, "Yes. I'm afraid this village can't completely provide for itself. I occasionally go into town under the guise of a traveling merchant and stock up on supplies. People would start getting suspicious if I stopped making my regular trips, I think."

"Oh yeah, I'm not saying you need to stop. I was just wondering if you'd heard any useful rumors while in the city."

"Not particularly," she said with a shake of her head as she finished handing out food.

"Oh, but something nice did happen," she stated as she took off the necklace she was wearing and showed it to Sim and the others. "It's pretty, isn't it? I got it as a gift. Apparently, it's called Loyalty's End."

"Is that an artifact?" Sim asked. Only he and Nirke, the two beastmen in the room who possessed mana, could see the necklace for what it was.

Nirke's expression soured, and he stared intently at the woman's face. Meanwhile, Sim asked, "That's a rather ominous name for a necklace, don't you think?"

"Really? I think it's wonderful. Being loyal to the person you love until the very end sounds so romantic, don't you think?! I know I'll be

loyal to—”

Smiling, the woman walked over to Sim. A shiver ran down his spine as she got close.

“Commander, something’s wrong! Get away from—”

The moment Nirke tried to hold the woman down, her eyes rolled into the back of her head.

“To Ehit-samaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Her smile grew even wider, and as she screamed, her necklace started to emit a blinding light.

A second later, there was a deafening boom, and the tent was blown apart. The rest of the village’s residents stared at the explosion in shock, pale-faced.

“C-Commander?!”

“What happened?!”

Confused, the residents tried to run over and help Sim and the others.

“Oraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Unfortunately, a series of screams echoed throughout the mountains, stopping the people in their tracks. Hordes of people who looked like regular civilians started appearing from all of the secret passages that led to this village. There were more of them than anyone could count.

“H-How did they find out about this place?!”

A new series of screams could be heard from within the village, answering the confused resident’s question. They had traitors in their midst. Without any way of knowing who was friend and who was foe, the Liberators fell into a panic. Plus, the army of enraged commoners didn’t help matters either. Worst of all, their leaders had all been within that tent, and now there was no way of knowing whether they were still alive.

“W-We have to fight them!”

“Don’t be stupid, they’re just civilians!”

“But the way they’re acting isn’t normal!”

“That’s all the more reason not to harm them! Have you forgotten our creed?! Remember why exactly you chose to join the Liberators!”

“Y-You’re right! For now, let’s figure out whether or not General Sim is still alive! We need to find our Skynet and Dark Gate and Dark Key as well!”

Both their means of communication and their escape tools had been in the tent with Sim. If those tools hadn’t survived the explosion, then the Liberators would be completely isolated within this death trap.

The situation was quite grim, so all of the beastmen warriors looked suitably worried.

Further to the east, the Pale Forest had once again become a battlefield. A million soldiers from the Odion Federation had launched a fierce assault on Haltina.

“Report from battalion four! Our defensive lines have been breached!”

“The center can’t hold any longer! We can’t afford to use non-lethal tactics! There are just too many of them!”

“Without Her Majesty’s powers, we can’t hold back a horde this big!”

A series of hysterical voices mingled as they were transmitted through the large Skynet that had been set up in the room behind the throne room within the Haltina Republic’s palace.

Panicking a little, Badd shouted, “Hey, is there still no word from Sim or HQ?!”

“It’s no good! Our transmissions aren’t getting through!”

“Goddammit,” Badd spat.

Three days ago, they’d received an urgent report from Marshal, who’d been hiding in the Liberator village near Agris, the federation’s capital.

“There’s something strange happening in the Odion Federation.”

That was all it had said. The next day, an army composed of both soldiers and civilians had invaded the Haltina Republic. There had been so many of them that they’d covered the northern, central, and southern parts of the forest. It honestly felt like some kind of sick joke, but the reality was that this massive army was on the verge of swallowing the republic whole. In some places, the beastmen were no longer able to stick to non-lethal tactics, so they’d been forced to start killing the invaders. The attacks didn’t stop even at night, and corpses were piling up within the forest at an astonishing rate.

“Parsha! We can’t maintain the front any longer! Have everyone retreat to the capital! We’ll make our stand here!”

Parsha grimaced when she heard Badd say that. The capital was the Haltina Republic’s final stronghold. Over the past three days, many of the republic’s residents had been evacuated here already. Moreover, the Sacred Tree still hadn’t recovered fully. It was nothing more than a giant target at the moment.

Parsha wanted to avoid turning the capital into a battlefield if possible. Unfortunately, she wasn’t left with much of a choice.

“I suppose holding out until Her Majesty returns is the best option... Very well, then. Call everyone back!”

Badd nodded and had the messengers inform everyone at the front lines to retreat.

“Badd!” a familiar voice cried out as Badd was overseeing the

retreat. Badd turned to see Marshal, who'd gone missing right after he'd let everyone know that the federation was coming three days ago.

"Marshal! Where the hell have you been this—?"

"You can scold me later, so shut up and listen! I need you to contact every single Liberator village."

"I know the world's gone to shit, but—"

"It's not just that! Everyone needs to be told that there are fanatics within the Liberators' ranks as well!"

Badd went as white as a sheet, which prompted Marshal to grab him by the shoulders.

"Listen up. They got Tony and Abe! I'm the only survivor from the Angriff branch! They knew exactly where our village was! The traitor was—"

One of the messengers interrupted Marshal, thinking he was bringing good news.

"Marshal-dono! Shushu's safe! She's at the main gates right now and—"

"Wait, don't let her in!"

"Huh? But—"

"She's fallen into the enemy's hands. Shushu's the one who told the church the location of our village!"

Badd paled, while the messenger hurriedly told the guards at the gate to close it. Unfortunately, it was too late. There was a huge explosion, and everyone rushed toward the terrace. In the distance, they could see smoke rising from the main gate.

A deafening war cry resounded throughout the city. For the first time in the Haltina Republic's history, human invaders had breached the capital's gates...and it had happened almost comically easily.

Soldiers and civilians from the federation rushed through the gates, and the screams of beastmen filled the air. A bewildered voice called out to Shushu—who was still standing in front of the demolished gates—from behind.

"What...are you doing?"

Shushu looked over her shoulder to see Valf. There was no madness in her gaze, but it was cold as ice.

"I asked you a question. Answer me, Shushuuuuuu!" he roared as he charged forward, intending to incapacitate her. However, he was blown back by a powerful shock wave.

"Isn't it obvious? I'm getting revenge."

"Shushu, you..."

The federation soldiers charged mercilessly at the dumbfounded Valf. His men desperately held back the assault, while Valf thought

back to what Shushu had said during the banquet before the decisive battle. She'd said that she'd let go of her grudge toward her homeland, that she'd change herself so that she could change the world. After their long discussion, that was what she'd told Valf. And yet—

“They used your feelings for their own twisted ends, didn't they?”

Rage welled up within Valf. Someone had taken advantage of Shushu's hatred, the very feeling she'd been working so hard to let go of. Even if whatever magic that had transformed regular people hadn't been able to turn Shushu into a fervent believer in Ehit, it had still been enough to amplify her desire for revenge to the point where she'd turned on her own comrades.

“Shushu, open your eyes!” Valf shouted.

Shushu looked at him like he was trash and blasted him with another shock wave, but this time, it didn't blow him back. He used his special magic, Float Field, to increase his own gravity, and then strengthened his body as much as possible and crossed his arms in front of him to block.

“Remember what I told you? I'm never gonna abandon you again.”

Shushu fired yet another shock wave at him, but Valf refused to fall. Coughing up blood, he walked toward Shushu. Shushu's lips twitched, and she fired a fourth shock wave at him.

“Gah...right now, I'm one of the republic's generals. I'm not a powerless nobody like I was back then.”

During their talk, Valf had confessed something to Shushu. He'd told her that he'd been part of the unit that had turned Shushu away when she'd finally managed to return to the forest. Back then, he hadn't been a general...or even a captain.

“Our laws are important. We need them to protect our brethren! But—gah—I should have still tried to save you! If I couldn't have let you back into the country, I should have at least left it with you!”

“Tch. Shut up...” Shushu mumbled as she fired blast after blast at Valf, to the point where the air around him started to warp from the consecutive shock waves.

Valf's bones shattered, his internal organs ruptured, and his vision began to grow blurry, but he never stopped moving forward.

“Even a human brat was able to take you in, but I—”

From the moment that Miledi had stepped foot into the republic, Valf had known that Shushu was the girl he'd turned away way back when. It was then that he'd realized the difference between his resolve to protect his people and Miledi's. That was why Meiru's words had rankled him so much. But now he'd grown, so he truly did want to protect his fellow beastmen with every fiber of that being, and he was going to prove that to Shushu.

“I’m sorry I didn’t save you back then. I’m sorry I turned my back on you.”

“I told you to shut up!”

“Neither I, nor this country, will reject you ever again. I promise.”

“Ah—”

Valf’s unwavering stride struck a chord with Shushu despite her burning desire for revenge, so her thoughts grew muddled. Thoughts of a much younger Miledi flashed through Shushu’s mind. Miledi had completely overwhelmed Shushu, while Valf looked like was about to drop dead any minute now, and yet, in this moment, he reminded Shushu of the Miledi from back then.

A searing pain lanced through Shushu’s head, and emotions that had been dulled suddenly welled up within her once more. The first thing Shushu felt was guilt.

“A-Ahhh! No...what have I done?!”

“Shushu!”

Valf finally reached Shushu, who was still firing off shock waves in a panic. Yet more blood spilled from his mouth as he embraced her, so Shushu let out a small gasp.

“It’s okay. Everything’s going to be okay,” Valf said as Shushu completely dispelled her Repulse. However, that also meant the two of them were wide open to an attack.

“Commander!” one of Valf’s men shouted just as a javelin pierced through both his and Shushu’s hearts, connecting the two of them together. The two of them then fell to their knees, their foreheads touching.

“I’m sorry... I’m sorry... I’m sorry...”

“It’s okay. Let’s just rest for a while, okay?”

Valf’s subordinates were swallowed up by the endless tide of people, but they left Valf and Shushu behind, presumably because they had no interest in corpses. And yet, despite the utter hopelessness of the situation, Shushu and Valf died with smiles on their faces.

Meanwhile, Marshal, Badd, and the beastmen warriors were fighting desperately to keep the invaders from reaching the palace.

“No killing this time—Egness!” Badd exclaimed as he whirled his scythe over his head, shooting out small crescent-shaped jet-black pulses with each spin. He fired off a hundred a second, each pulse draining a regular commoner of all their mana and knocking them unconscious. Unfortunately, the federation’s soldiers weren’t quite as weak. Moreover, the majority of the republic’s warriors hadn’t returned yet, so Badd and the others were severely outnumbered.

Badd deflected hundreds upon hundreds of arrows, but eventually, one of them slipped past and struck his side. No matter how skilled he

was, he couldn't keep this up indefinitely, so slowly but surely, more arrows started hitting him.

"Marshal! You've got a girlfriend, so you better not die before I do!"

"Shut up! I don't wanna hear that from a loser who can't even confess to the woman he loves!"

The two of them bantered with each other mostly to confirm that they were alive. The battle was too fierce for them to take their eyes off their opponents for even a second, after all. Plus, if they fell, the people hiding in the palace would die. Craid and the other royal guards were with them as a last line of defense, but it was just a matter of time before they were overwhelmed, which was why Marshal and Badd fought and fought and fought.

They didn't even know how long they'd been fighting for anymore. Maybe it'd just been an hour or two, or maybe it'd been five or six. Badd couldn't tell if he was even breathing anymore. Still, despite his injuries, he pressed on through sheer force of will. The woman he loved's precious home was behind him, so he couldn't afford to fall now. And yet, even though he was still burning with fighting spirit, his body felt cold.

"Hey, Miledi, did you find a way to kill Ehit?" Badd started mumbling to himself as he fought. Not because he'd gone insane, mind you, but because he expected Meiru to use restoration magic to see what had happened here and he wanted to leave his final words behind.

"Sorry, but it looks like this is as far as I go."

He smiled lightly as he took an arrow to the shoulder. He couldn't even remember how many arrows he'd been hit by at this point.

"You know, normally, the second-in-command would be giving you some words of encouragement like, 'Make sure you kill god for me!' or something, but...honestly, if it seems impossible, I'd rather you just run."

Another arrow sliced through his thigh, and Badd slumped back, leaning against the sacred tree.

"If you were here, you'd probably say something like, 'It's too late for that, idiot!', wouldn't you? Ha ha, sorry. But don't feel like you have to fight Ehit for us or anything, all right? We all chose to be here...and we knew the risks of making that choice."

Badd failed to parry a wind blade, so it sliced into his neck, causing a fountain of blood to spurt out.

"Sorry I was such a pathetic adult. If possible, I'd like at least you to live."

He could feel his consciousness slipping.

"Lyu, are you listening to this too?"

Another two arrows hit Badd in the chest, but he ignored them and continued shooting off non-lethal mana shock waves at everyone.

“The truth is, I’ve been in love with you this whole time. You know how I told you I come from a clan that worships the spirits of Ur lake? Well, when I first met you, I thought you were one of those spirits. I fell for you at first sight.”

Laughing, Badd crushed the legs of ten soldiers that tried to charge at him. But in return, one of them managed to cut deep into his left arm, so it went limp.

“But you know, I don’t think I could ever be your husband. After all, I couldn’t bring myself to insult you or step on you.”

Everything around him started to go silent, but even as he was on death’s door, he felt a surge of strength and swung his trusty scythe one more time. The shock wave he unleashed was his biggest yet, and it knocked a hundred soldiers unconscious at once. Even trapped by whatever fanatical brainwashing Ehit had done to them, the remaining soldiers still stared at Badd in awe.

“Ha ha, surprised I knew about your secret fetish? I’ve actually known for a while,” Badd said, grinning mischievously as he imagined Lyutillis’s shocked face.

“Haaah... Haaah... Am I forgetting anything? Oh, yeah. If Egxess hasn’t been stolen, and you can’t find a suitable wielder for it, dump it into the bottom of Ur lake. It’s not the kind of thing that should be left lying around.”

Egxess’s terrifying black aura began to fade as its owner’s life finally came to a close.

“Oh, and...hmm, actually, I guess that’s everything. I’ve got nothing else to say.”

A huge fireball came at him and Badd used the last of his strength to slice it in half and absorb its mana. However, Egxess’s aura didn’t get any stronger. The light in Badd’s eyes slowly dimmed, but he didn’t fall. Up until the very end, the Liberators’ second-in-command remained standing, defiant.

“Now then, it’s time to show you all just how much of a sore loser I am!”

Smiling fearlessly, Badd stood against the oncoming horde of soldiers until his body had been completely destroyed.

A day before the world went insane, at the southern coast of the Astlan kingdom, where The Melusine was anchored...

“Tonight sure feels ominous...” Salus muttered as he looked worriedly through the bridge’s window.

“I haven’t seen a moon this red in ages,” Mikaela replied. Despite her blindness, she could see the moon clearly with her Soul Sight.

The guards on watch squirmed uneasily, and Salus mentally berated himself for adding to their fears.

“Any word on what those shooting stars were?” he asked the person manning the Skynet in an attempt to change the subject.

“Not yet, sir. We have no information on the new pope either.”

Salus frowned and let out a sigh. A few days ago, he’d gotten reports from numerous branches that they’d seen silver shooting stars in the sky. There was, of course, one thing that first came to mind upon the mention of the word silver. The Liberators had been on high alert, looking for any sign of an apostle anywhere.

Salus had even sent a spy unit consisting of Jinx’s crew as well as Sui into the theocracy’s capital when the new pope had been anointed, so he’d been hoping for some news. However, none of them had reported back to him yet. Of course, he knew that the theocracy would be on high alert, so his spies would have a hard time getting out to contact him, but he couldn’t help but worry.

“I need to snap out of it. I keep on envisioning the worst-case scenario.”

No matter how hard he tried though, Salus couldn’t shake the feeling that something bad was about to happen. Miledi and the others had found a lead on how to defeat Ehit, the world was turning its back on the church, and people were finally beginning to think for themselves. Everything seemed to be going the Liberators’ way. And yet, Salus’s instincts, which had been honed from decades of navigating stormy seas, told him that they needed to hurry or everything would be lost.

Suddenly, the person manning the Skynet delivered some good news.

“Captain, we’re picking up a transmission from our spies!”

“Patch it through!”

Salus had been waiting for news for ages. More than anything though, he was just glad everyone was okay. Though, as soon as the image popped up on the Skynet, he realized he’d celebrated too soon.

“Sui! Are...you okay?!”

Sui was covered from head to toe in wounds. She was leaning against the wall and breathing heavily. Blood trickled down her face, one of her rabbit ears was missing, and her shoulder and side were heavily lacerated as well.

Sui ignored Salus’s question, as she had very little time and said, “You have to warn everyone not to get close to any towns or cities! Evacuate all of our supporters within the cities as well! Get as many of them to the Pale Forest as you can and call Her Majesty back immediately!”

“Wait, Sui! What happened?! Where are Jinx and the others?!”

“Everyone else is dead,” Sui stated in a flat voice. However, it was clear from her expression that she was just holding her grief in. The situation was so urgent that she couldn’t even afford to take the time to cry.

“Did you get everything I said? Listen up. Those church bastards are using the apostles to—”

Before Sui could explain the details, a massive explosion rocked the ship. Salus tumbled to the ground, while Mikaela shrieked in surprise.

“Wh-What happened?!”

“I don’t know. That explosion came from...inside?! I’ll switch comms over to the ship!”

Tim’s panicked voice echoed throughout the ship.

“U-Urgent report. The Skynet has been damaged! Shit, why are they—?”

Looking back at the Skynet’s screen, all Salus could see was Sui desperately trying to say something. Her voice was no longer coming through, and there was static on the screen.

“Tim, who are ‘they’?! Are there intruders on the ship?!”

The only reply Salus got was a series of screams as a second explosion rocked the ship. Mikaela then used her Soul Sight to see what was going on directly.

“No way...”

“Mikaela, what do you see?!”

In a shocked voice, Mikaela said, “The dragonmen. The dragonmen who were assigned to guard us are attacking the ship!”

Salus’s eyes widened in shock and goosebumps rose on his arms.

“Send a distress signal! Can we reach Rigan?! I need to know what’s happening in the Dragon Kingdom!”

“It’s no good! Our calls aren’t getting through!”

Sui’s image was on the verge of disappearing too, so the Skynet was clearly too damaged to be usable. It seemed she was under attack as well, as she was desperately trying to hold the door closed while she shouted at Salus. The most he could pick out were the words “church,” “brainwashing,” and “world.”

“You’ve done enough, Sui! Just get out of there! Return to the forest!”

Sui smiled sadly as she read Salus’s lips. Then, just before the image cut out completely, she opened her mouth and said, “Sorry, but there’s somewhere I need to go first.”

Salus’s lip-reading skills weren’t the greatest, but he was sure that was what she’d said.

“Emergency ascent! We need to head back to the Dragon Kingdom’s capital! I know the king would never betray us!”

The pilot quickly moved to obey, but before he could touch the controls, Mikaela shouted, “Deploy a barrier above us! They’re coming from the sky as well!”

It seemed the dragonmen had already gained control of the skies. Countless flashes lit up the bridge, each of them a dragon’s breath.

“Miledi, I’m sorry...” Salus muttered. He knew this situation was hopeless.

At around the same time, countless roars echoed through the Dragon Kingdom’s capital. Fires had broken out within the city and breath attacks shot back and forth while people screamed in the streets.

There had been a coup d’état within the kingdom. While the dragonmen had kept a vigilant eye out for external enemies, they hadn’t paid enough attention to their own internal affairs. Moreover, the surprise attack orchestrated by this rebel had been extremely well-planned, considering she was a young soldier and her followers were mostly civilians.

Half of the kingdom’s strongest fighters and generals had been killed or incapacitated in the initial assault, and those who had survived couldn’t tell friend from foe. The battlefield was utter chaos.

The one shining beacon of reason within the madness was none other than the dragon king, Tragdi Augis Astlan.

“Open your eyes, Shival!” Tragdi roared, transforming into a resplendent golden dragon. Gold sparks shot out of his mouth as he addressed the leader of the rebels—his daughter, Shival Augis Astlan. The two of them were facing off above the ruins of the city’s palace.

Shival had the same golden scales as Tragdi, and at a distance, they looked almost identical.

“You’re the one who needs to open his eyes, father. I’ve told you time and time again, if we wish to have a future, we dragonmen need to join hands with the church. Why can’t you understand that?!”

“It is that very church that has branded us as evil.”

“If we pledge our service to them, they’ll accept us as divine dragons instead. We can fill the hole left by the destruction of the Paragons of Light. That way, we won’t be persecuted anymore. No more of our brethren will have to die the way mother did!”

“The dragonmen you’ve riled up are killing those very same brethren you claim you want to protect!”

“This is a revolution. I need to shatter the old ways and the old values. These are necessary sacrifices that will ensure the Dragon Kingdom will continue to exist for another thousand years.”

“Shival, you...”

Shival valued lives over pride and tradition. Tragdi couldn’t

rightly say that was a bad philosophy. However, Shival had never been the kind of person who would condone sacrifices for the sake of the greater good.

“Wait...”

Shival’s sudden radicalization and the glint of madness in her eyes wasn’t normal...and Tragdi became sure of his suspicions the moment a streak of silver light grazed his shoulder.

“Gah, I knew it! The church is behind this!”

Looking up, he saw an apostle hovering above them, bathed in the red light of the moon. Furthermore, there was an armada of theocracy airships coming in from the west. It seemed Shival had invited the church’s armies into the Dragon Kingdom.

“So they managed to corrupt you, Shival...?” Tragdi said in a sad voice, sounding more like a father than the dragon king in that moment.

“You’re mistaken, father. I chose this of my own free will,” Shival replied as she flew up to join the apostle.

“Order your men to stand down and name me the new dragon queen.”

“So that we can become Ehit’s lapdogs? Would you kill all the other races if your new master ordered you to?”

“This is all to ensure the dragonmen’s future.”

The church’s forces started landing in the city, surrounding Tragdi and his soldiers. Though the church had been severely weakened after their battle with the Liberators, there were still a good number of apostleified knights remaining. Tragdi gazed into Shival’s eyes, a pained expression on his face.

“Shival, I know I was not a good father to you.”

Shival blinked in surprise, then smiled a little and replied, “Father, does that mean...?”

She trailed off expectantly, hoping that he would surrender, but his next words made her smile stiffen.

“Hear me, citizens of Astlan. Tonight, the Dragon Kingdom will fall. Flee the capital now while there’s still time. Soldiers, protect the civilians until they’ve made it to safety! This is my final order as Dragon King Tragdi Augis Astlan!”

His booming voice reverberated throughout the entire city. Sparks ran down the length of his body, electrifying the air and calling down lightning bolts from the sky.

“Have you forgotten why it is that I never keep any guards around me?”

The dragonmen fighting for Shival trembled in fear, overwhelmed by the immense pressure Tragdi was emitting.

In order to be the ruler of the dragonmen, a person had to be the

strongest among them. Everyone knew that, so they all knew how strong Tragdi was. Tragdi kept no guards because they'd just get in the way during any serious battle.

The reason Shival had asked for an apostle was because she knew that outside of the seven ancient magic users, only an apostle could hope to defeat Tragdi, the lord of thunder.

The majestic dragon king let out a roar, making Shival's dragonmen faint on the spot.

"Bear witness to the true might of the dragon king!" Tragdi exclaimed as he bared his fangs at the apostle, daring her to attack. He needed to buy as much time as he could for his people, and for the Liberators, to escape.

This would be his final battle.

As the dragon king's roar echoed through the city, there was one section of it that was under heavy attack by Shival's dragonmen: the three-story building where the Liberators had been staying. The left and right wings of the building had already been demolished, and it was only thanks to the Hallowed Ground barrier surrounding the center that it was still standing.

The walls were still one step away from crumbling even in the center, however.

"Dad! Where are you?!" Shirley's voice echoed through the corridors. Blood was dripping down her face, and she was unsteady on her feet. She heard a groan from underneath a pile of nearby rubble and desperately started clearing it away. Underneath it was Rigan, his chest caved in. He let out a small groan as Shirley uncovered him.

"Shirley..."

"D-Dad! It's gonna be okay! We just need a healer and—"

"Forget...about revolution... Live for your own happiness instead..."

He was hovering on the edge of consciousness and wasn't even aware of what he was saying. However, despite being a firebrand revolutionary himself, he truly did wish for his daughter to abandon the path he'd chosen. Speechless, Shirley simply squeezed Rigan's hand.

"Miledi-kun...you too..." Rigan muttered.

"Dad..." Shirley called out to him. However, there was no reply. She ignored the sounds of battle raging all around her, looking only at her father's lifeless eyes.

No...just like that? Shirley thought blankly, still squeezing her father's hand.

Just then, another explosion rocked the building and a pillar started falling toward Shirley. She looked absently up at it, not really

seeing it, and making no move to get out of the way. Right before she was crushed, however, Baharl tackled her to safety.

“You idiot!” he screamed as the pillar crashed into the walls, causing them to creak ominously. It looked like they might cave in at any second.

“Get a grip, lass! We’ve gotta make it to the barrier!”

“B-But dad—”

“Rigan’s dead! But you’re still alive! And if you’re still alive, you’ve gotta keep struggling until the very end, right?!” Baharl exclaimed as he slapped her across the face, snapping Shirley out of her stupor.

He’s right. Rigan Nelson’s daughter would never just meekly accept her death!

“The barrier...must be Reinheit-san’s doing.”

Indeed, Reinheit and Sharm were both in the Dragon Kingdom. They’d arrived three days after Laus and the others had left, and they’d been talking with Kaime and Selm in Laus’s place ever since.

“The kid’s got good reflexes. Or wait, maybe he just has good instincts? He cast that barrier just before the first attacks came. It’s thanks to him that half of us are still alive.”

Of course, that meant the other half were dead. They’d escaped execution by the church only to be killed here instead.

Reinheit had wanted to expand his barrier to cover the whole building, but it was unfortunately too big for him to push the barrier out that far in the few seconds he’d had. Besides, he’d needed to make it strong enough to withstand multiple dragonmen’s breath attacks, so he wouldn’t have been able to make it much bigger regardless.

“See you later, Rigan. Wait for me up there in heaven, all right?”

Upon hearing Baharl pay his respects to Rigan, Shirley bit her lip and silently said her own farewells. The pair then stepped out of the rubble and saw breath attacks flying back and forth from all sides. It seemed some of the neighbors had come to their aid, and were fighting back against Shival’s soldiers despite being regular citizens themselves. Thanks to these dragonmen’s aid, Baharl and Shirley were able to make their way into the barrier without getting incinerated.

“You’re back. Where’s Ri—? No, I guess there’s no need to ask. I’m glad you’re safe, Shirley.”

“Thank you, Karg-san...”

While the rest of Andika’s residents and the prisoners that had been freed from the execution grounds were huddling together, Karg was sitting off to the side, desperately working on something. He could tell just from the look on Shirley’s face what had happened to Rigan.

“Where’s the army? We won’t last much longer,” Baharl asked as

he looked over at the front porch.

Reinheit was standing there defiantly, absorbing the concentrated fire of dozens of dragonmen. The fact that he was able to block them at all was a testament to how suitable he was to be a hero, but judging by the way he was gritting his teeth, he wouldn't be able to hold on much longer.

"No clue," Karg replied. "I didn't want to entertain the possibility, but it's looking like there really may have been a coup."

"You think all the generals are dead? Now that's a scary thought."

Shirley glanced around, looking for someone. When she didn't see him, she asked in a fearful voice, "Where's Sharm-kun? I don't see him anywhere."

Karg and the others glanced away awkwardly...and Shirley paled, thinking for a moment that he might be dead.

But then, suddenly, Reinheit looked over his shoulder and said, "Sharm-sama has gone to his family."

It was clear from his tone that he was forcibly holding himself back from running after Sharm.

"Wait, you let him go by himself?!"

The Barn family were technically prisoners, so they'd been housed in a manor at the edge of the city instead of here with everyone else. With the city now a battlefield, that was an incredibly dangerous journey for an eight-year-old child to make alone.

"Sharm-sama's instincts told him that if he didn't go now, he'd never get to see his family again."

"But you let him go alone?!"

"I have to stay here to protect everyone," Reinheit replied simply.

In response, Shirley shouted, "Didn't you pledge to serve him?! How could you let him—? If you go now, you can still reach him in time!"

"Sharm-sama ordered me to remain here! It's because I pledged to serve him that I must follow his orders!"

Sharm had told Reinheit to protect everyone before running off right after the initial assault. Reinheit had, of course, wanted to stop him, but he'd seen the look in Sharm's eyes. Sharm wasn't just a child who couldn't read the situation, so he had made the decision to go knowing the consequences. His resolve had been real. In that moment, he'd looked just like his father...and Reinheit would have spit in the face of Sharm's trust and his own loyalty if he'd gone against Sharm's orders.

"Besides, I am a *knight*! It is my duty to protect those who cannot protect themselves! No true knight can allow personal feelings to cloud their judgment and choose the safety of one over the safety of many!"

Reinheit Ashe was a true knight to his very core. Laus and Sharm both knew this, which was why they trusted him so much. When the time called for it, they knew he would always protect everyone he could, the same way he'd protected them.

Shirley could find no words to argue back, so it was Karg who filled the ensuing silence by saying, "All right, this'll work!"

This whole time, Karg had been working on repairing a small cylindrical object. He clapped his hands together, put on the finishing touches and exclaimed, "Transmute!"

The former head of the Orcus Workshop was a master synergist second only to Oscar, and while the barrier artifact that Oscar had left behind on the off-chance that the Liberators were attacked in the Dragon Kingdom had been damaged in the initial assault, Karg had been able to swiftly repair it. Thanks to that, a glowing golden spatial barrier appeared on top of Reinheit's Hallowed Ground.

"Perfect, I managed to get it running at least!"

Reinheit looked back in surprise, and another group of workers shouted, "Karg-san! The metal slime things are back!"

"Oscar really is a genius. I can't believe his slimes brought back more artifacts *and* survivors!"

There was a hole in the floor of the living room and Metal Batlams were coming out of it one after another, bringing salvaged artifacts and rescued survivors with them.

Oscar had left behind a plethora of artifacts, as well as all the remaining Metal Batlams that had survived the battle with the church. There were barrier generators, shields, enchanted swords, and even crossbows.

A second later, a group of Andikan residents came down the stairs, yelling, "We got some more artifacts from upstairs!"

Karg and the others hadn't just sat around while Reinheit had protected them. They'd been working on protecting themselves so Reinheit would be free to chase after Sharm.

"Go, Reinheit! We'll take care of things here!"

"B-But—"

"We can buy some time, but not much, so hurry up and bring the kid back as soon as possible, okay?"

Everyone was looking at Reinheit, their expressions making it clear that they wanted him to go.

"If a hero protects someone, it's only natural that those people will want to protect the hero in turn, right?" Shirley said with a smile.

"Think of how bad we'll feel if a kid dies because you were stuck protecting us," Baharl added.

"Thank you, everyone. I promise I'll return soon."

With tears in his eyes, Reinheit dashed out of the building.

As soon as he was out of sight, Karg let out a sigh and collapsed.

“Karg?!”

“Karg-san!”

Baharl and Shirley ran over to him, pale-faced. Baharl helped him into a sitting position and shouted, “Come on, get a grip! What happened?! Did you run out of mana?!”

“Ha ha, it’s not that. I’ve just hit my limit,” Karg said as he unbuttoned his shirt. Baharl gasped upon seeing what was beneath it. Karg’s entire right side was covered with a Metal Batlam...and blood was dripping out of the cracks in it.

“Don’t tell me you’ve been like this the whole time...”

Karg simply smiled at Baharl. He had indeed taken a fatal injury during the initial assault, but he’d stopped the bleeding with a Metal Batlam.

“Listen up. I was able to repair this thing...but not fully. What I did was...just a stopgap measure...”

In a strained voice, Karg explained that he’d just jump-started it and that it was currently draining more mana than usual to remain active. Everyone would need to work together to keep providing it with mana because if it stopped, there was no guarantee it would start up again.

Baharl and the others gritted their teeth as they watched all the color drain from Karg’s face. Without Meiru or Diene’s help, there was no saving him. Thus, they listened to the master synergist’s final words because that was all they could do for him.

“Tell Oscar... Actually, I’ve already said all I want to him...so just tell him to keep walking the path he believes in.”

“Yeah, I will.”

“Also, tell Miledi...thanks for...freeing my son...from his cage...” he mumbled, trailing off faintly. Then, in the faintest of whispers, he added, “Oh, and tell her not to push herself too hard...”

As Karg breathed his last, Baharl took over maintaining the barrier artifact. Breath attacks slammed into it as the dying man growled, “The rest of you better survive this!”

Kaime and Selm watched the chaotic battle unfold from atop a tall hill on the outskirts of the city.

“Aaah, I knew Lord Ehit hadn’t abandoned us!”

“Yes, that’s right, Licoris! We are part of the prestigious Barn family, after all!”

Licoris and Debra were there as well, crying tears of joy as they watched the airships and apostleified knights destroy the Dragon Kingdom. Their reaction was the expected one from citizens of the theocracy.

“Brother...no, forget it. It’s nothing.”

Seeing Selm's hesitation reassured Kaime a little. It was heartening to know that he wasn't the only one feeling conflicted about the arrival of the church.

"Fear not, you two. This is the appointed meeting place. They'll be coming for you soon," a young dragonman said to Kaime with a smile.

"You'll be back with the church in no time," another said to Selm with an identical smile.

The two dragonmen seemed to think Kaime and Selm were worried they'd be attacked before the church reached them. Their smiles were surprisingly light considering they'd just killed all of the guards that had been assigned to watch over the Barn family. Those guards had really just been guards in name and had spent more time looking after the family rather than keeping an eye on them, so those careless smiles irked Kaime and Selm.

"You sure look cheerful for someone who just killed your own comrades," Kaime said, causing the dragonmen's smiles to fade a little, though not much.

"It's unfortunate, but this was a necessary sacrifice for the greater good."

"Returning you two to the church will prove our devotion to Ehit and earn us a place in his ranks."

"My! I thought you were all evil monsters, but it seems the grace of Lord Ehit has reformed you," Licoris said with a smile.

"That's right. From now on, I swear we will serve as the theocracy's protectors as divine dragons."

"How wonderful!"

Kaime and Selm looked sickened as they listened to the conversation between the dragonmen and their mother.

Some time back, the dragonmen guards that had been killed had started opening up to Kaime and Selm. They'd started telling the brothers about life in the Dragon Kingdom, and Kaime and Selm had even started looking forward to eating meals with them. Eventually, Kaime and Selm had become intrigued by the dragonmen's way of life and their vast repository of knowledge. No matter how much Kaime and Selm had insulted the dragonmen at the beginning, their guards had never gotten angry. Not only that, they'd never even tried to force their viewpoints onto Kaime and Selm.

"You should spend some time talking to the dragonmen. Then you'll learn what true virtue is all about."

That was something Laus had said to them before he'd left.

"Where's the virtue in this?" Kaime muttered quietly, prompting the young dragonmen to turn questioningly to him. He ignored them, though. He couldn't bear looking at such lowly creatures.

"I see you're all safe," a familiar female voice said to Kaime.

“Division Captain Lelei Argeson?” Kaime asked, turning around in surprise.

The reason his tone was questioning was because while she looked like the Lelei he knew, she had a totally different demeanor. Furthermore, she was no longer wearing the Holy Templar Knights’ uniform and was carrying a spear rather than her bow.

“Watch your tone. You stand before the new pope.”

“Ah,” Kaime and Selm both said in surprise. They had heard the news that the old pope had died, and Darrion Kaus had been appointed the new pope. However, this wasn’t Darrion Kaus, which was why they were confused.

“The Barn family doesn’t have a monopoly on spirit magic,” Darrion said simply, which was enough of an explanation for Kaime and Selm. They immediately understood what had happened to Lelei’s body, and what Darrion Kaus’s true ability was.

A shiver of fear ran down their spines and Kaime hesitantly asked, “Wh-What happened to Lelei?”

“Does it matter?”

Kaime fell silent upon hearing that. Licoris, Debra, and the two dragonmen knelt upon realizing they were standing before the leader of the new world order.

“The church is extremely short-handed right now, so I shall grant you the opportunity to erase your failure and the shame of getting kidnapped. Slaughter the heretics left within the city.”

Darrion swung down with his spear, cutting through the bracelets that suppressed Kaime and Selm’s apostleification. He also handed them a replica Holy Sword and Divine Staff. Kaime and Selm stared blankly down at the weapons in their hands.

This is a good thing. Lord Ehit didn’t abandon us, and he’s even given us a chance to clear our names. We should be happy about this.

And yet, Kaime couldn’t bring himself to rejoice. Feeling conflicted, he nevertheless started following Darrion. But before he could go more than a few steps, a voice called out to him.

“Nii-san.”

Looking up in shock, he saw a panting Sharm. Sharm grimaced, worried he might not have made it in time.

How did you find us? Why did you come here? What are you thinking?

Kaime’s head was filled with questions, and for a moment, he was at a loss for words.

“Hmm, well, I guess this saves us some time,” Darrion said, grinning.

Sharm looked up at Lelei, confused. But after a second, realization dawned on him.

“Darrion Kaus?” he asked.

“Oh?” Darrion said, impressed that Sharm had seen through to his true essence so quickly.

Before Kaime or Selm could say anything, Licoris said in a shrill voice, “How dare you address Her Eminence so casually, you filthy traitor!”

Despite being Sharm’s mother, she looked at him like he was trash. A tinge of sadness came over Sharm’s expression, but his determination remained undaunted.

Debra was no kinder to Sharm either, saying, “Kaime, this is undoubtedly a chance granted to us by Lord Ehiti! Slay that traitor and redeem the Barn family’s honor!”

Kaime stiffened up. Until just recently, he would have gladly done just as Debra asked. He wouldn’t even have hesitated as he cut Sharm in half. And yet, now he was conflicted.

I can do it! I have to! The pope is watching

His body wouldn’t listen to him, almost as if it had a mind of its own. Sharm was nothing more than a worthless pebble, and yet now that he was here, Kaime found himself thinking back to all the time they’d spent together in the Dragon Kingdom. No matter how rude Kaime had been, Sharm had shown up day after day to speak with him. The same brother Kaime had tried to kill had spoken to him with a smile on his face and called him Nii-san.

Sensing Kaime’s internal struggle, Selm frowned and said, “Your Eminence, why don’t we take him back with us and reeducate him?”

Darrion turned to Selm, looking at him as if he was nothing more than an insect. There was no need for words. Selm could tell that if he suggested anything like that again, Darrion would kill him.

Selm shrunk back, feeling as though Darrion had seen right through him. Licoris and Debra went pale, as if the world had just ended.

“Your Eminence, please have mercy! It’s that man, Laus Barn, who misled these two!” Licoris exclaimed.

“Kaime, Selm! Return to your senses!” Debra shouted. If anything, it was the two of them that looked like they’d taken leave of their senses.

“Kill Sharm Barn here. It is only right that a member of the Barn family cleans up the family’s mess,” Darrion said, making the order an explicit one from the pope.

Kaime squeezed his sword’s hilt so hard that it hurt as he glared at Sharm.

This would be so much easier if you would just see me as your enemy, and not your older brother. If you were just looking at me with hate like any other heretic, then...

“Nii-san, you can’t go back to the church. You’ll lose yourself completely this time,” Sharm said, his gaze clear and unwavering.

“Shut up! Kaime, hurry up and kill him! The pope gave you an order!” Licoris shouted.

“Please fight. For yourselves, more than anyone or anything else. You don’t have to worry about me. Just get mother and grandmother to safety,” Sharm stated flatly.

It was at that point that Licoris snapped. She drew one of the young dragonmen’s daggers from its scabbard and started running at Sharm.

“M-Mother?!” Kaime and Selm shouted. However, Licoris paid them no heed.

“If only I hadn’t given birth to you!”

“M-Mother, I—” Sharm stammered, shocked.

“Shut up, shut up, shut up! I’m not the mother of a heretiiiiiiic!”

Licoris bowled into Sharm and the two of them went down in a heap of flailing limbs. She then brought her dagger down toward Sharm’s chest, and he blocked it with his arm. He screamed in pain as the blade pierced his soft flesh, but he doggedly grabbed onto Licoris’s arm to prevent her from striking again. Furthermore, he kept trying to appeal to Kaime and Selm even as Licoris assaulted him. Incensed, Debra picked up a nearby branch and ran over to help her daughter kill her grandson.

Within seconds, Sharm was covered in numerous cuts and bruises. The apostleified knights with Darrion watched on in amusement, and the two dragonmen even applauded. They were *enjoying* watching a mother kill her son.

“There are so many more wonderful things in this world than you realize.”

Laus’s words once again ran through Kaime and Selm’s heads. They thought back to the sunset they saw together from the beach near the capital. There had been other happy dragonmen families there, enjoying the view.

Even though what their mother and grandmother were doing was something a true believer in Ehit should’ve been proud of, Kaime and Selm felt disgusted.

“Hmm, I see Reinheit Ashe is heading this way. I imagine witnessing Sharm Barn get killed by his relatives will shake him to his very soul.”

Darrion was saying something, but Kaime and Selm didn’t notice.

“Kaime-nii-san, Selm-nii-san, get a hold of yourselves!”

They were too captivated by Sharm’s unwavering gaze.

How can he stay so unyielding even after being hurt so badly?

“Finally building up the resolve to be a proper father to you two.”

Laus had said they could ask him for anything, so they'd constantly challenged him to duels. Kaime and Selm had, of course, been looking for an opening to kill him, but ultimately, the duels had ended up being more training sessions than anything else. At some point, it had even stopped annoying them that Laus could wipe the floor with them. They started feeling a kernel of pride again knowing that their father really was the world's strongest knight.

Of course, they'd never admit that to his face, but they had asked him what had made him so strong, and the above words had been his reply.

"I know it might be too late, but I swear I won't let anyone, not even Ehit, steal your freedom ever again," he'd added afterward with a wan smile.

"You need to get away, even if it's just you two!" Sharm shouted at Kaime and Selm. Licoris and Debra were having more trouble than they'd expected with him. That was only natural, though. The two of them had lived a sheltered life wanting for nothing, whereas Sharm might still have been a child, but he'd struggled and fought his way through numerous deadly battlefields. His will to resist was on a different level.

"That's enough. Out of my way," Darrion said, getting tired of this farce. He stepped forward, preparing to deal the finishing blow himself.

To Kaime, everything seemed to be moving in slow motion. It was only his memories with Laus that flashed by at a breakneck pace. He remembered the first time Laus had praised them for their fighting skills. He'd patted them on the head, and for the first time, Kaime had realized just how big his father's hands were. He remembered the first time Laus had cracked a joke. The first time he'd taught them magic. The first time he'd cooked for them—which had been a disaster. For the first time, Kaime had come to learn what a family truly was.

"You should decide for yourselves what it is you want in life. What you want to protect, who you want to fight, what you want to believe in, all of it."

Most importantly of all, Laus had taught Kaime to choose for himself.

"Don't stop struggling!" Sharm shouted.

"Ah!"

His voice was like a hard slap to the face, and it brought Kaime and Selm back to their senses.

Kaime looked up to see Darrion holding a bloody spear aloft. Sharm was below him, one of his arms and one of his legs broken. He couldn't even stand, but he remained resolute in the face of death.

"You have to decide for yourself what you want in life!"

Sharm was saying the exact same things his father—the strongest knight—had said. Before he knew it, Kaime was on the move.

“What are you doing?” Darrion asked as Kaime jumped in front of Sharm and held his sword behind him to block Darrion’s spear. He then fired a disintegration beam behind him, forcing Darrion to leap away.

“Nii-san?”

“Shut up, idiot brother.”

Sharm blinked in surprise. Even if Kaime had added “idiot” in front of it, he’d called Sharm his brother. Kaime had never done that before.

Kaime turned back to face Darrion, and Selm walked over to stand with him. Licoris, Debra, and the apostleified knights were all at a loss for words. Just then, Reinheit appeared.

“Sharm-samaaaaaaaaaa?!” he shouted, growing pale when he saw the condition Sharm was in.

Upon seeing Kaime and Selm standing next to Sharm, his face contorted in anger, but then Kaime shouted, “You worthless hero! Can’t you even protect one kid?!”

At the same time, Selm summoned up a bunch of chains to grab Sharm and throw him toward Reinheit.

“Get out of here,” Kaime said, pointing his sword at Darrion. Selm also brandished his staff at the knights, cold sweat pouring down his forehead.

Seeing the two brothers’ resolute expressions, Reinheit realized who the real enemy was here.

“Nii-san, no! You have to come with us!”

Sharm desperately reached out to Kaime and Selm with a bloodied hand, and Reinheit hesitated, unsure if he should really leave.

“Oh, Holy Sword. My goddess...” Darrion said with a rapt look in his eyes.

Suddenly Reinheit felt as though some foreign object was trying to bore its way into his head and he fell to his knees with a groan. However, that was all that happened.

“I guess with things as they are now, it’s impossible...” Darrion said, clicking his tongue in frustration. It seemed he couldn’t take over Reinheit’s body.

“I won’t let you take him!” Selm shouted, activating his special magic, Forbidden Command, to seal Darrion’s own special magic.

“Tch, what a pain,” Darrion mumbled as he rushed at Reinheit.

However, this time Kaime blocked him. He activated his special magic, Sacred Way, as well, doing everything in his power to keep Darrion from reaching Reinheit.

Kaime might have been older than Sharm, but he was still a boy.

And yet, he was actually managing to hold Darrion at bay. It was taking every ounce of his strength, but he was doing it.

“We can’t hold them off for long. Hurry up and go! You’re too outnumbered here to do anything!” Selm shouted, using Sanctified Purge and a volley of light spells to keep the apostleified knights from overwhelming Kaime. There were more knights and dragonmen headed this way, so he knew this tenuous equilibrium wouldn’t last long.

More than anything else though, Sharm’s wounds were severe. If he wasn’t treated soon, he’d die. At the same time though, the three brothers had finally come to care for each other. Reinheit didn’t want them to have to part so soon.

“Reinheit Ashe, as Laus Barn’s eldest son, I order you to protect the next head of the Barn family!”

Those words from Kaime were the last push Reinheit needed to make his decision.

“As you command, my liege! I’m sorry!”

Sharm squirmed in protest, but Reinheit chose to prioritize Kaime’s orders and ran from the battlefield as fast as he could.

“My goddess!” Darrion shouted, his spear glowing brighter than usual. He forcibly broke Kaime’s guard and sliced him in the chest, but even as Kaime coughed up blood, he fired off a Celestial Flash to keep Darrion from running past him and chasing after Reinheit.

“Brother!” Selm shouted in a pained voice.

“Hah, compared to Laus Barn’s attacks, Darrion’s are nothing!” Kaime said with a fearless grin, thinking back to all the times he’d dueled his father.

Reinheit was well out of sight now, so Darrion turned back to face Kaime and said, “I suppose I should have expected as much from the sons of a traitor.”

Kaime scoffed and replied, “I’m just choosing for myself for once.”

He once again pointed his sword at Darrion. Licoris and Debra were yelling something at him, but he didn’t feel like paying any attention. Instead, he turned to Selm and said, “Sorry, Selm, I’ve killed us both.”

He knew that only death was waiting for him at the end of this road, but he was left with no other choice.

Selm shrugged and replied, “It’s fine. You did it for our idiot brother, after all.”

Selm hefted his staff and tried to remember all of the techniques his father had taught him in the short time they’d spent together.

“Do you think he’ll be happy with our choice?” he muttered, wondering if Laus would praise them for choosing to do this of their own free will.

"In your dreams. You know he'll be pissed."

"Ha ha, I guess so. He did say he wanted us to live."

But even so, I hope you're at least proud of us... the two of them thought simultaneously.

In the end, they never did manage to tell him how they truly felt.

"It's just like back then. Nothing's changed at all!" Sharm lamented tearfully as the light of Reinheit's healing magic enveloped him.

"How many times do I have to be saved by the sacrifices of others? How many times do I have to leave the people I care about behind to die?!"

"I'm so sorry."

Even though he was a knight, Reinheit had failed time and time again to safeguard the people he'd sworn to protect. He'd needed others' help just to survive, and at every turn, he'd had to choose who to prioritize because he couldn't save everyone. His apology sounded more like a remonstrance of his own weakness, so Sharm hugged his neck, knowing that Reinheit shared his pain.

"I want to become stronger. I want to be stronger, Reinheit!"

"You can! I know you can become stronger than anyone else!"

Reinheit and Sharm's screams echoed throughout the city as they ran. Unsurprisingly, there were a few apostleified knights who heard them and flew down to attack. One of them fired off a Celestial Flash that Reinheit countered with a much more powerful Celestial Flash that obliterated the knight's own and went on to bisect him. Another knight thrust at Reinheit with his spear, but he dodged to the side and cut the knight's head off as he passed by.

Reinheit didn't even stop as he dispatched the knights, running back to where the Liberators were as fast as he could.

Meanwhile, the dragon king's battle grew fiercer and lightning filled the sky above the city.

Even though Reinheit was this generation's legendary hero, chosen by the Holy Sword itself, he couldn't even fathom taking part in the insane battle unfolding up above.

I'm so useless.

Berating himself wouldn't magically fix anything, so even as he inwardly despaired, Reinheit pressed onward, determined to at least let Karg and the others escape.

"Reinheit!"

Unfortunately, it seemed he wouldn't be allowed to do even that. Just as Sharm's warning rang out, dozens of knights swooped down on his location, destroying all of the nearby houses.

Reinheit didn't even have time to curse. All he could do was

dodge, parry, and counter the endless rain of attacks, all the while making sure he didn't drop Sharm and ensuring he kept casting healing magic on him. No matter how grim things got, Reinheit was going to at least make sure Kaime and Selm's sacrifice didn't end in vain.

However, he was sorely outnumbered. Moreover, dragonmen were coming to join in and help the knights.

They must be taking orders from Darrion.

There were far too many of them for this to be a coincidence. And at this rate, he would be overwhelmed.

"It's not over yet... Limit—"

Even if it meant collapsing later, Reinheit would cling to any option that would let him live even a moment longer. But before he could activate his Limit Break, aid came.

"Save your trump card for when you really need it."

A deep blue streak of light mowed down a group of apostleified knights...and a second later, more streaks—each one a different color—blew through the other enemies surrounding Reinheit.

"Grice-dono! You're alive?!"

"I *did* nearly die earlier, but yes, I am thankfully alive."

With a flap of his wings, Grice Schnee landed next to Reinheit. A group of dragonmen soldiers, with Nieshika among them, then formed a protective ring around Reinheit and Sharm.

"Thank goodness we found you two. Come, we'll guide you."

"Where to?"

"A secret escape route. Don't worry, Baharl and the others have already been evacuated."

As Nieshika shepherded Reinheit down an alleyway, he turned back to look at Grice.

"What about you, Grice-dono?"

"A general cannot leave his king alone on the battlefield. I will fulfill my duty," Grice stated as he looked over his shoulder at Nieshika, a heartrendingly gentle expression on his face.

"Farewell, my beloved wife."

"Farewell, my beloved husband."

Nieshika smiled lovingly back at Grice, then grabbed Reinheit's arm and started dragging him toward the escape route.

"N-Nieshika-dono."

"There's no need to say anything. Both my husband and I are simply upholding our pride as dragonmen," Nieshika said in a voice that was at once both gentle and strict.

Neither Reinheit nor Sharm could think of anything to say to that. They traveled in silence as Nieshika took them to where Baharl and the others were waiting, after which all of the Liberators got on the

backs of a hundred transformed dragonmen and flew out of the kingdom.

No one looked the slightest bit relieved as they left. The pain of losing so many of their comrades was still fresh. Moreover, it was clear the Dragon Kingdom wouldn't survive past tonight. As they fled southeast to the pale forest, it was only Nieshika and the other dragonmen's encouragement that kept the Liberators from falling into despair.

The journey to the republic took four days. They stuck to valleys and narrow passes to avoid pursuers, and once they reached the northern edge of the forest, they kept low, hiding under the canopy.

"I can see the sacred tree. We're almost there," Nieshika said, turning back to look at Reinheit and Sharm.

"Thank you so much. We wouldn't have been able to make it without you and the other dragonmen's help."

"We don't deserve your thanks. Miledi-san entrusted your care to us, but we failed to notice the coup one of our own was planning...and as a result, many of you died. If we didn't at least save as many as we could, we wouldn't be able to face Miledi-san again."

Reinheit shook his head as if to say it wasn't her fault.

"More importantly, how is Sharm-kun doing?"

"He's sleeping soundly, though he still has a bit of a fever..."

"I see... He's experienced a lot of tragedy these past few days, so I'm sure he's mentally exhausted. Hopefully Laus-san returns soon."

As they got closer to the sacred tree, Reinheit and the others noticed something was off.

"Huh? That's not fog, that's smoke! Is there a fire?"

"I hear screams as well... I'm taking us higher!"

Nieshika ordered the other dragonmen to wait where they were, then started a steep ascent. From her higher vantage point, she could easily tell what had happened to the beastmen's haven.

"No...they got the republic too?" Reinheit muttered.

"This may, in fact, be happening all over the world..."

Hundreds of thousands of troops were pouring into the forest. The republic was currently being invaded.

"W-We have to retreat! Until we know how far the invasion has progressed, we can't drop people off here! We have to go east...all the way to the eastern coast! We should be able to hide there!" Reinheit exclaimed.

"Very well, then. All units, head east to—"

Just as Nieshika turned around to address her dragonmen, a burst of silver light hit her in the flank, gouging out most of her side.

"Don't worry about me, go!" she shouted as she started falling. The dragonmen gritted their teeth in frustration, but they were loyal

to their mistress, so they obediently fled east even though they were burning with the desire to help her.

Reinheit could hear Shirley and the others calling out to him, but there was another beam of silver light coming up from the ground, so he couldn't spare the time to think about anything else.

"Nieshika-san."

"Focus only on protecting Sharm-kun!" Nieshika shouted, beating her wings even as she fell. She then summoned a powerful gust of wind that blew Reinheit and Sharm off her back and canceled her transformation to make herself smaller to avoid the beam.

The three of them fell toward the trees, and Reinheit created an aerial platform just before they hit the ground to absorb the impact of their fall. He wanted to immediately run to Nieshika's aid, but he was forestalled.

"Ngh, an apostle!"

Indeed, an apostle was making her way straight to him, disintegrating all of the trees along her path. She swung both her claymores down at Reinheit, who blocked with his Holy Sword. However, the apostle was far stronger than him, and he was blown away with ease. He slammed into one of the trees behind him, coughing violently.

"Gah! Agh! Shit!"

The weight in his left arm was gone. He'd dropped Sharm. Through his blurry vision, he could see Sharm on the ground a short distance away. The impact appeared to have woken him up, and he was looking around in shock.

"Did you really think you could escape from me, Uralt, my beloved goddess?" the apostle—who should have been emotionless—said in a passionate voice.

"Wait, is that you, Darrion Kaus?!"

"I told you once long ago that you're all that I care about."

Darrion completely ignored Reinheit, his gaze focused solely on the Holy Sword.

"I betrayed my comrades and the entire world...I even debased myself and became Ehit's pawn...all so that I could stay with you!"

He swung his claymores wildly, looking like a possessed madman.

"No matter how many times you chose a new hero and left my side, eventually you always realized I was the only hero for you and came back. I am your eternal hero!"

The Holy Sword began to glow, and Reinheit sensed a profound sadness and a deep regret coming from it. In his mind, he could see a beautiful black-haired woman crying and begging him to stop Darrion.

Unfortunately, Reinheit wasn't strong enough to take on someone with an apostle's strength just yet. Besides, Sharm's safety took

precedence over the sword's wishes.

"I won't let you run from me any longer!" Darrion roared as he locked eyes with Sharm, then cast his gaze over the trees in the distance. If Reinheit and Sharm ran, he would start killing others. His gesture said that far clearer than any words could.

The moment Darrion had pinpointed their location, running had stopped being an option. Thus, Reinheit steeled his resolve for a fight.

"Limit Break - Overload!"

He would surpass all of his limits, and defeat the fallen hero in front of him to save his soul.

"The world has no need for any heroes other than me. I'll be taking over that body of yours."

The very first hero and the current hero clashed, and the resulting shock wave flattened all the trees in the vicinity. Each time their swords crossed, a crater formed where they'd been standing, and with each passing second, more trees were obliterated.

Reinheit fought desperately, only barely managing to keep up with Darrion's immense strength. His burning resolve allowed him to draw out even more of the Holy Sword's knowledge, and the techniques of past heroes started flowing into his mind.

"Uwooooooooooooooooooooooh!"

Risking everything, Reinheit fought with every ounce of his being.

"You know, I took over the bodies of most of the past heroes."

Unfortunately, Darrion was still a cut above him. He wasn't shaken like he had been when his goddess had first chosen Reinheit as her new hero, so Reinheit couldn't rely on any tricks like surprise attacks or trying to take Darrion down with him.

After a few more clashes, one of Darrion's claymores cut Reinheit from shoulder to hip. Reinheit pressed on, undaunted, but then Darrion's second claymore got him in the thigh and the strength left his leg. The counter he'd bet everything on was batted aside like it was nothing, and Darrion followed up by elbowing him in the stomach. Reinheit's ribs cracked, and he coughed up blood.

None of Reinheit's techniques were working. Darrion was simply the worst matchup for him. After all, he was an expert at beating heroes.

Eventually, Reinheit's time ran out.

"Ah..."

He dropped to his knees as his Limit Break - Overload ended.

"Finally."

Darrion had known Reinheit stood no chance without Limit Break, and he also knew that Reinheit's soul would be weakened after he did, making him easier to take over.

Truly, the world's first hero was every other hero's greatest

nightmare.

Darrion looked over at Sharm and said, "I'll send you to the darkest depths of despair."

Darrion wanted to make sure he'd done as much damage to Reinheit's soul as possible to ensure the takeover went smoothly. Reinheit screamed at him to stop, but of course, Darrion didn't listen. Instead, he strode right over to Sharm.

"R-Run, Sharm-sama..." Reinheit said in a raspy voice. He didn't even have the strength left to reach his hand out to Sharm. Through his hazy vision, he watched as Darrion stomped on Sharm, causing the young boy to scream.

Dammit, move!

He struggled so hard he coughed up blood, but even then, Reinheit's body barely twitched.

Why am I always so weak? Fight, goddammit! I swore I'd put my life on the line to protect others!

As he thought back to the oath he'd made, Reinheit realized something. When he'd been chosen by the Holy Sword, he'd thought, "I don't care even if it costs me my life."

That's right, since when was just putting my life on the line enough? No, I should be willing to give it up entirely if that's what it takes to save the people I care about!

The Holy Sword once again began to glow in his hands. He could still feel the sword's sadness, but now he could also feel it gently comforting him.

I'll give you my life, so please give me the strength I need to save Sharm-sama! Even if it's only for an instant, that's all I need!

Right before Darrion's claymore pierced Sharm's heart, there was a boom and a rush of immense power flowed through Reinheit. Darrion turned back in shock to see a spiral of pure white mana rising up to the heavens.

Reinheit had just activated Limit Break's special derivative skill, True Martyr. It multiplied the user's stats a dozenfold, but lasted only ten seconds and cost the user their life. This was the ultimate trump card that Reinheit could use only once, the strongest skill that cost his entire remaining lifespan.

"Uwoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooh!"

"Ngh, you bastard!"

This time, it was Darrion who was sent flying. Reinheit immediately chased after him, knowing that every second counted.

"I'm taking you down here and now!"

The Holy Sword glowed brighter than it ever had before, turning into a blade of pure light. Darrion brought up one claymore to block Reinheit's next swing, but it sliced through it like a hot knife through

butter.

Everything moved in slow motion for Reinheit, and he saw Darrion's second claymore coming at him. He held out his empty arm, and the moment the blade dug into his bones, he twisted his arm to redirect the blade's trajectory.

Darrion's eyes widened in surprise, and Reinheit delivered the most powerful thrust of his life right into the apostle's core. An apostle's body was strong enough to deflect regular blades, but the Holy Sword stabbed right through the core with ease.

"Holy Sword Uralt! Put his crazed delusions to rest!"

"I-Impossible!"

Ultimately, Darrion had only one soul. Even if he split it up to take over other peoples' bodies, those fragments were still connected. That was how he'd been able to communicate with the other bodies he'd taken over, after all. However, that also meant anyone who came into contact with even a fragment of his soul would be able to affect the entire thing.

Reinheit was determined to cut down every single fragment of Darrion Kaus's soul. That was impossible even for Ehit, but Uralt, the goddess that had been with Darrion for so long, could do it. Light burst from Darrion's chest, spreading throughout the entire forest and stopping even the crazed federation armies in their tracks.

"My goddess...I..."

As the particles of light dispersed and Reinheit pulled the Holy Sword out of his opponent's body, Darrion reached for it with a trembling hand.

For a moment, it looked like a young black-haired man and a beautiful black-haired woman were holding hands. But then, Darrion collapsed and Reinheit fell to his knees.

"Reinheit," Sharm said, crawling over to where Reinheit was. Using the last of his strength, Reinheit held the Holy Sword out to Sharm. Sharm wrapped his hands around Reinheit's, squeezing both them and the sword hilt tightly.

"In the end...taking him down with me...was the best I could manage," Reinheit muttered.

"Reinheit..."

Tears spilled from Sharm's eyes, and he pushed himself to his feet despite the pain his body was in. He knew instinctively that this would be the last time he'd get to speak with his loyal knight.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I couldn't do anything. You protected me for so long, but I couldn't even..."

Smiling, Reinheit shook his head.

"Uralt, I have a request. Please...grant your strength to this boy."

"Reinheit?"

Reinheit looked down at the sword, which was still glowing faintly.

"I entrust you, the Holy Sword, to Sharm Barn...the kindest child of the strongest knight."

Sharm stared at Reinheit in surprise. A second later, the sword left Reinheit's hand and slowly floated toward Sharm as if acknowledging Reinheit's request.

The current generation's hero and the next generation's hero locked eyes.

"I know...that you can grow...to be stronger...than anyone else."

Those were Reinheit's final words.

"I-I will! I promise...I'll become the strongest knight ever!" Sharm gave Reinheit a knight's vow, then after a brief moment of grieving, he rose to his feet. The sounds of battle were still raging all around him, growing closer by the minute.

"I've had enough," Sharm declared, grabbing the floating sword and closing his eyes before pressing the flat of the blade against his forehead. "What do I have to do to end this battle?"

The sword glowed a bit brighter in response.

Sharm opened his eyes and looked up at the sacred tree.

"That's fine with me," he said in a determined voice. Even if what he was about to attempt was dangerous, especially with how tired and injured he was, if it would bring an end to the fighting, then it was worth it.

"Sharm-kun..."

Just then, Nieshika walked into the clearing. There was a gaping wound on her side, which was still spurting blood. She leaned against a nearby tree and gasped when she saw that Reinheit was dead and Sharm was holding the Holy Sword.

"Nieshika-san, I'm sorry, but I need your wings."

Even though Sharm wasn't even ten yet, the resolve in his gaze was enough to awe Nieshika. After a brief pause, she smiled and said, "There would be no greater honor than bearing you on my back, young hero."

The pale violet dragon, ruler of light and water, ferried Sharm through the skies at lightning speed. Weaving between the branches of the sacred tree, she took him up above the republic's capital. And as they climbed, Sharm spotted Badd standing defiantly in front of the sacred tree. However, he didn't move at all as soldiers swarmed past him, nor did he react to their war cries. Marshal, too, was on the floor in front of the entrance to the trunk.

"Head to the base of the trunk!"

Nieshika summoned a torrent of water to push back the soldiers, then landed. The few surviving beastmen soldiers and all the

beastmen citizens who'd retreated to the tree's upper levels all watched on in amazement as Sharm drove the Holy Sword into the ground next to the sacred tree and began concentrating.

Nieshika stood protectively in front of him, using her body as a shield. The wounds she'd suffered were already fatal. If she was doomed to die either way, she would much rather have used what remained of her life to protect others.

Naturally, the soldiers all concentrated their attacks on the dragon that had suddenly appeared. Within seconds, Nieshika's body was riddled with holes. But somehow, she managed to protect Sharm for just long enough.

"Holy Sword Uralt! I beg you, grant me, Sharm Barn, temporary dominion over the sacred tree!"

The sword emitted a blinding flash...and the sacred tree began to glow. That glow enveloped Sharm, after which a wave of white fog began to spread from the tree.

Within seconds, the fog expanded to cover the palace, the capital, and the rest of the forest. The federation's soldiers suddenly found themselves unable to see even a few feet in front of them. Their sense of direction became muddled, and though they thought they were still charging into the palace, they found themselves running out of the forest.

After a few seconds, Sharm's eyes closed and he fell unconscious. Using the Holy Sword to forcibly grant him dominion over the forest had taxed him heavily. Within two or three days, he would die. That had been the price of stopping this war.

A lone girl hid behind a trash can in an alleyway near the eastern exit of Horuo, Entris's northeasternmost city. She was Kiara, the poster girl for Wanda's Inn.

The hunt for the Liberators had finally reached Horuo. Kiara was covered in sweat, her breath came in short pants, and the streaks on her cheeks made it clear she'd been crying not too long ago. Her bunny ears, which were hidden by an artifact, twitched as they picked up a few familiar voices. A bunch of the local kids had looked up to her and called her Onee-chan. But now, their voices were filled with hate.

"Where are you, traitor?!"

"Get out here so we can kill you!"

They kept going on and on about how they needed to kill her so they could apologize to Ehit for ever becoming friends with a heretic. Kiara covered her ears with her hands to avoid their scorn.

"Why did things end up like this?"

She thought back to the evening when everything had come

tumbling down around her. Everyone had been called to assemble at the plaza next to the city's church. There had, of course, been quite a few people who hadn't gone, but some had in the hopes that the church would prove they really were as absolute as they claimed, while others had attended to try to figure out whether the church was trustworthy or not. The Wanda family had attended as well to see if they could gather any useful intel.

The same elderly bishop as usual had come out to meet the crowd, but there had been something strange about her. Thinking back on it now, Kiara regretted not running the moment that bishop had appeared.

If we'd done that, mom and dad would still be alive.

A few minutes after the bishop's speech had begun, everyone's doubts about the church cleared up unnaturally swiftly. The speech itself had just been filled with empty platitudes that any sane person would have been able to see through. The bishop had gone on and on about how the Liberators were actually mavericks who opposed god and wished to plunge the world into chaos. She'd also talked about how despite being Ehit's blessed children, Miledi and her comrades were trying to supplant him and rule over Tortus as gods in their own right for selfish, tyrannical reasons.

Kiara had expected everyone to call the bishop out on her bullshit. But instead, everyone had swallowed the bishop's words completely and the people who'd once been Kiara and the others' friends had turned toward the family with hate in their eyes.

From there, things got much worse. Even those who'd sided with the Liberators and those who hadn't come to hear the bishop's speech were soon assimilated into the mob, and eventually, even Kiara's neighbors had started attacking her and her family.

Marcus had stayed behind to block the doorway and give Kiara and Vera time to escape. His last words to them were, "Get out of here, you two! You have to survive!" Marcus had known that if he'd gone with them, Vera and Kiara would have had a harder time getting out alive. After all, both Vera and Kiara were rabbitmen. They were much better at sensing the presence of others, and they were also the race most suited to running away.

However, in the end, the two of them had still gotten ambushed by a group that had been waiting for them at the edge of town, so Vera had sacrificed herself to give Kiara a chance to escape.

"Get up and run! You're my daughter, aren't you?!"

That was what Vera had said as she'd taken a dagger meant for Kiara in the back. A hunter that had been good friends with Marcus had tried to stab Kiara in the heart and she'd been so shocked that she'd been a second late to react. However, Vera had not only blocked

the stab for her daughter, but had also then turned around and tackled the hunter to the floor to grant Kiara an opening.

However, Kiara had shaken her head and said that she was a Liberator too...and that she wanted to save as many lives as possible.

In truth, she just didn't want to part with her mother. However, Vera had smiled at her and said, "Please let me protect my daughter."

Kiara didn't remember much of what happened after that. All she knew was that she forced herself to stop crying and run.

Unfortunately, all of the city's exits had been sealed off, so there wasn't anywhere left to run. Before she knew it, she found herself hiding in an alleyway.

If only I was stronger. If only I could fight like she can! Kiara thought back to the one other bunny girl she knew. Sui was an annoying, cowardly, lazy piece of shit, but she was strong. Strong enough to be one of the beastmen nation's top five warriors.

After the decisive battle, she'd stuck around at Wanda's Inn until she'd been ordered to go spy on happenings in the capital. At the time, her lips and tongue had been so damaged by the poison she'd used on her enemies that she couldn't taste anything. And yet, she'd acted like those wounds had been nothing and had spent her days lazing around and making fun of Kiara.

Right now, Kiara wished she had even a fraction of the strength Sui had.

Idiot. Now's not the time to be wishing for the impossible! I need to get up and move! If I die here, mom and dad's sacrifices will have been in vain! scolding herself internally, Kiara rose to her feet and wiped away her tears.

"Ah...shit."

Unfortunately, it was precisely at that moment that she heard footsteps coming from either side of the alleyway. She'd let herself get distracted for too long, and now there was nowhere to run or hide. In a few seconds, this alleyway would be filled to the brim with crazed fanatics out for her blood.

Kiara's expression was halfway between laughing and crying...when suddenly, someone jumped down from a nearby rooftop and landed directly in front of her. The newcomer covered Kiara's mouth with her hands and pressed her against a wall as she said, "Quiet. If you make any noise, I'll kill you."

To an outside observer, it would have looked like someone was trying to kidnap Kiara. However, Kiara herself felt relief flood through her the moment she laid eyes on her "assailant."

A moment later, the mob entered the alleyway. Nothing was covering Kiara or the newcomer at all, but the mob's eyes passed right over them. The people at the other end of the alleyway reacted much

the same. A few men stepped into the alley and glanced around with bloodshot eyes, but they passed right by Kiara without ever acknowledging her existence. They then joined the group at the other end and the mob went on its way.

Only after they were gone did the newcomer take her hand off of Kiara's mouth.

"Pwah! What are you doing? Wait, you're hurt!"

"Ugh, god, you're so annoying."

The person who'd saved Kiara was none other than the bunny girl she'd been thinking about—Sui.

Once Sui stepped away, Kiara noticed just how badly she was injured. She was missing one ear, and her combat uniform was soaked in blood. She was moving sluggishly as well, and at least this time it wasn't just because she was lazy.

"Let's get out of here," Sui said, ignoring Kiara's question and grabbing her hand as she led her out of the alleyway.

As always, Sui's treatment of Kiara was brusque, which was precisely why Kiara didn't understand why Sui had come to her rescue.

"Why? Why did you bother saving someone like me?"

Sui had no reason to come here. As the Haltina Republic's premier spy, her life held immense value. Meanwhile, Kiara was just an expendable member of the Liberators' support branch. Making a detour to save her while Sui was so badly injured made no sense.

It wasn't as though the two of them were particularly close either. In fact, they fought anytime they were in the same room. Sui had even told Kiara multiple times that she hated cheerful girls like her.

It doesn't make any sense.

Like before, Sui didn't bother answering Kiara's question. Thanks to Sui's special magic, they were able to reach the gate without once getting spotted, and they were then able to pass through the blockade without attracting attention as well.

"Kuou's waiting in the forest close to here. He'll be able to take you to a Dark Gate. You should be able to reach the forest within three days."

After the decisive battle, Kuou and his wolves had coordinated with the beastman army to help everyone retreat. Then, when Sui had been dispatched to the capital, they'd been the spy team's means of transportation. Though in the end, all of the wolves in Kuou's unit had been slain when everyone had needed to flee the capital.

"Shouldn't I head to a closer base? We need to tell everyone what's happened through Skynet..."

"You really are a dumb bitch, you know that? Do you really think this sudden transformation's only happening here?"

“Wait, don’t tell me the whole world’s like this?!”

“You bet it is. The apostles who scattered around the world have disguised themselves as priests and bishops and are using charm magic to brainwash everyone.”

“Then...that means the bishop in our city is actually—”

“An apostle, yep. The scariest thing about their magic is that the people affected by it can pass it on to other people, like a disease. But for whatever reason, the Liberators and anyone who truly believes in their message are unaffected. Basically, we’ve got a worldwide inquisition on our hands.”

Kiara stared at Sui in shock as the true gravity of the situation washed over her.

“No way... Then what are we supposed to do?”

“Hell if I know. Maybe Her Majesty’s got an idea? If even she doesn’t have a plan, though, we’re all screwed.”

“How can you accept this so easily?!”

“Because that’s reality. Anyway, for now, we’ve gotta focus on getting back to the Pale Forest. The more people we can safely evacuate there, the more bodies we’ll have to defend our last bastion.”

Man, I really wish we hadn’t lost Lac Elain, Sui thought.

A mobile aerial base that was capable of teleporting and contacting people over extremely long distances would have been quite useful. In fact, that would have allowed the Liberators to ignore the wave of madness sweeping across the world and focus solely on rescuing their own.

I guess that’s why the apostles were so hell-bent on taking it out.

Sui let out a sigh as the pair reached the edge of the forest where Kuou was waiting. Despite Sui’s special magic, Kuou’s senses were keen enough to pick her out, so he started making his way to her the moment she stepped foot into the trees. As he came into view, Kiara noticed that he wasn’t wearing his usual artifact armor. Furthermore, his snow-white fur was matted with dried blood. It was clear from that just how difficult the flight from the capital had been.

“As long as we can get Her Majesty back, she’ll be able to activate the fog barrier again. Then we’ll just have to pin our hopes on Miledisan and the others—”

As Sui explained the plan, she snapped her fingers to give Kuou a signal. But just then, there was a faint *think* and Sui staggered backward as if she’d been hit by something. She then slumped to her knees.

“Huh? Sui? What’s—?”

Blood spilled from Sui’s mouth and a red stain started spreading around her chest. Soon, yet more blood dripped down her sleeves as a lone silver feather dropped from Sui’s chest and floated to the ground.

She'd been sniped.

Where'd that come from? How'd they find us? Have they been tailing us this whole time? Sui thought as she watched Kuou run over while Kiara tried to help her sit up. However, those thoughts slipped away as quickly as they came, and Sui's vision began to blur.

This wound was fatal. She'd been hunted as easily as a common rabbit. However, Sui was no meek rabbit that would go down without a fight.

"Don't underestimate meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

With a bestial roar, she took a bottle out of her pouch and bit down on the glass, forcing the liquid within down her throat before she lost consciousness. She'd just downed a powerful poison that was sure to kill her, but she was dead either way, and this poison granted her an immense amount of strength for a few minutes.

"Kuou! Take her and flee!" Sui exclaimed as she leaped to her feet, kicking Kiara onto Kuou's back. She then jumped to the side, and a second later, a silver flash gouged the ground she'd been standing on.

That first feather had already dealt Sui a fatal blow, but her opponent had fired a follow-up disintegration barrage anyway.

"Aren't you embarrassed to be going all-out against two weak bunny girls?!" Sui shouted, throwing a dagger at the old bishop who came rushing toward her at top speed.

That dagger was one of Oscar's and it was imbued with the power to rend through both mana and space. Not even an apostle could take that head-on, and as Sui expected, the bishop-apostle batted it aside with her claymore. However, the moment the claymore made contact with the dagger, the dagger's hilt exploded, releasing mana-draining powder into the air.

"Yaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Sui didn't let up her assault, though. She needed to make the most of the forty or so seconds left to her. And so, she fired off a barrage of other deadly attacks, using every single weapon at her disposal, from poison to acid to mana draining weapons to lightning emitters to heated wires to freezing daggers to petrifying spray.

"Sui! Wait! We have to escape together! Kuou, let me go!"

Kiara's voice was growing steadily further and further. Kuou had abandoned Sui without hesitation and immediately started taking Kiara to safety.

Good doggy... Sui thought with a smile. There was no way she would be able to beat an apostle, even with Kuou's help.

Sui was glad Kuou had managed to survive this far. He was one of Vandre's strongest familiars, which meant that despite being a monster, he also possessed a Dark Key and the ability to operate it.

She had no doubt he'd be able to safely get that annoying, overly cheerful girl to the Pale Forest.

"Ah..."

To Sui's surprise, she didn't feel much pain as the apostle's claymore pierced her chest and pinned her to the ground.

Still looking like that old bishop, the apostle used her other claymore to sweep away the mana-draining powder around her. Sui's suicide rush hadn't even managed to scratch her.

"I didn't think you would manage to escape the capital. You're surprisingly skilled, considering how weak and cowardly rabbitmen are."

The apostle's eerily serene voice reached Sui even as her consciousness began to fade.

"Had you not wasted your time rescuing your worthless comrade, you would have been able to get away," the apostle stated as she pulled her claymore out of Sui's chest. "Fear not. While I have no reason to let her live, there's also no need to go out of my way to chase her down. After all, the people you wish so dearly to protect will be hunted down soon enough either way."

After all that, she dispersed the blood on the claymore with a surge of disintegration magic and turned on her heel. She then started walking away, as if Sui had been nothing more than a fly that she'd swatted.

Just like a fly, Sui had been quite easy to kill. However, the reason the apostle had gone out of her way to chase her down and finish her off despite receiving no such orders from Ehit was because Sui had been that much of an eyesore. Sui knew that too, and she grinned.

"One day..." she muttered.

"Hm?"

"One day, a bunny girl way stronger than me will be born. A true legend."

The apostle stopped and turned over her shoulder to look at Sui. Upon seeing the girl's expression, she took an involuntary step backward.

"Mark my words. It'll be a bunny girl who'll destroy your future."

Sui's smile was ghastly, but even on the verge of death, her eyes were shimmering with raw determination. She wasn't just saying that to have the last word, she was utterly convinced of her prediction.

"Don't be ridiculous," the apostle replied, sounding like a sore loser even though she was the one who'd won the battle. She then flew away, and the strength started to leave Sui's limbs. The slight breeze that flew through the forest felt comfortable.

Well, I did my best... Sui thought, praising herself as she prepared to die.

“Sui...” a tearful voice said, prompting her to look up through her blurry vision and see Kiara staring down at her. She could feel warm raindrops hitting her face.

“Why...did you come back...you idiot?”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

Sui couldn’t tell whether Kiara was apologizing for not being able to save her or for needing to be protected.

Sui looked hazily up at Kiara’s distraught face and said in a raspy voice, “Rabbitmen...are strong.”

“Sui?”

“The reason we’re cowards is...because we know...better than anyone...how valuable...life is...”

“Yeah.”

“You might...not be able to do anything now...but as long as you’re alive, you can...”

It was for that very reason that Sui had fought. Even though she was lazy, and deep down a real coward, she’d risked her life time and time again to protect her fellow rabbitmen’s future.

Sui reached out with bloodied fingers and wiped away Kiara’s tears.

“I...hate you... You’re so cheerful...and cute... You really piss me off.”

“Sui...”

“But...you’re probably the greatest rabbitman...after me...”

Sui did not doubt that Kiara’s future was full of potential. That was why she’d risked everything to save her.

“Idiot. You should have believed in your future over mine,” Kiara replied, taking Sui’s hand into her own. “You know what, I hate you too. You’re strong, cool, and piss me off...but I always looked up to you.”

Sui smiled, showing Kiara her genuine smile for the first time.

“You better make it out of this alive, Kiara.”

“Oh, I will, Sui.”

Sui’s hand went limp, and silence fell over the forest shortly thereafter. Kuou howled softly, mourning Sui’s death.

“Kuou, can we take her with us?” Kiara asked.

Sui had worked extremely hard, so she at least deserved to be buried in her homeland.

Kuou rubbed Kiara’s nose, his way of giving assent.

“Thank you,” Kiara said with a sad smile as she lifted Sui into her arms. She then put Sui on Kuou’s back, wiped away her tears, and took off the artifact necklace that disguised her appearance. Her bunny ears popped back up and her hair returned to its original color.

“Let’s go, Kuou.”

She made her ears stand up straight as she looked out into the distance.

That's right, rabbitmen are strong!

Kuou howled again, much louder this time, and then started sprinting through the moonlit forest.

After getting attacked at the fort, Rasul had led his forces north, to the wild, mountainous region of southern Velka. Only a few of his men had managed to survive the attack, so they were hiding in human territory. They were between the Reisen Gorge and the southernmost human settlement in Velka.

There was a simple reason why he'd chosen to go north during this chaos rather than return home. Namely, that the southern continent had gone insane as well.

"Rasul-sama. Is there any way I can convince you not to return to Igdol?" Lestina asked as she stepped into Rasul's tent.

Rasul, who'd been munching on a piece of plain bread, put down the loaf and turned to Lestina. The past few days had taken quite a toll on her, so she looked rather haggard.

"We should seek asylum in the Haltina Republic. The northern continent is littered with Dark Gates we can use to speed our journey as well. Most importantly, though, returning to the castle is..."

"Suicide?"

"Yes," Lestina said through gritted teeth, making a fist and slamming it against her leg.

Rasul understood exactly how she felt. After all, their own brethren had become their greatest foe. The demon empire had turned against its Demon Lord.

It had been soldiers from the very same demon army that had attacked Rasul and his contingent. Of course, the demons had also seen the decisive battle and had been moved by Miledi and the Liberators' struggle. Even the hardline hawk faction had started accepting Rasul's dream of coexistence and had sent reinforcements to Rasul to aid in his retreat.

Rasul had been overjoyed, so he'd gladly let those reinforcements into the fort, but then a few days later, those same reinforcements had launched a surprise attack on him and his men.

"To think this is how humans and demons would unite toward a common goal. Ehit really is one cruel bastard," Rasul muttered.

Right now, the demon army was working together with the church to eliminate the mavericks. It seemed unbelievable, but it was the truth. Rasul didn't know if Prime Minister Karm and General Angol had been brainwashed, or if they'd been assassinated, or if they were still around and trying to fight against the wave of madness.

Either way—

“I have to see what’s become of the capital with my own two eyes. That is my duty as the Demon Lord.”

If his nation had been plunged into chaos, it was Rasul’s duty to set it straight. Even if it seemed suicidal, he had to fulfill his obligations.

“Then I shall follow you, no matter where your path leads,” Lestina replied in a sad voice. She’d expected that answer.

Just then, the two of them heard a commotion in the distance. Worried they might be under attack, Rasul and Lestina hurriedly rushed outside.

“What’s going on?!”

“Your Majesty, we captured a human girl who’s been wandering around near our camp!”

“Is she a fanatic?”

“I don’t think so. She was alone. Apparently, her parents suddenly changed and she got scared and ran away from them.”

As the soldier gave his report, another one brought a girl who probably wasn’t even ten yet over to Rasul.

The soldiers were clearly on edge, so they’d treated the girl roughly enough that she was crying in fear. As cruel as it was though, such suspicion was necessary now that the world had gone insane and even children were trying to kill the Liberators.

“Hey, stop that! She’s just a child!”

To Rasul’s surprise, it was Lestina who spoke first. The soldiers looked taken aback as well. After all, Lestina was one of the demon supremacists. She’d just joined Rasul because of her undying loyalty toward him.

Lestina herself was surprised by how vehemently she’d spoken out against the soldiers’ treatment of the girl. She’d basically acted on impulse because the scared little girl had reminded her of the girl she’d saved back in the theocracy’s capital.

“Thank you for saving me, pretty lady!”

Even though she was a demon, that girl had thanked her with a smile and given her the heart-shaped stone she treasured. It had been a silly little gift, all things considered, just a regular old stone that was shaped slightly oddly. And yet, Lestina had hung onto it. In fact, she’d even tied it around a string and made a necklace out of it.

That was proof that the girl’s gratitude had begun to change Lestina’s traditionalist values. Unfortunately, in this case, the soldiers were the ones in the right. Lestina’s budding desire for coexistence had robbed her of her wariness at the worst possible moment.

“W-Wait, Lestina—”

“Don’t cry, little girl. We’ll get you fixed up right—”

As Lestina crouched down to address the girl at eye level, she opened her eyes and looked straight up at Lestina.

“Ah! Gaaaaaaaah!”

A second later, red hot flames filled the campsite. Lestina had activated her special magic, Inflammation. Both the girl and the soldiers nearby had been utterly consumed by her flames.

“Lestina!” Rasul shouted.

“Get back, Your Majesty!”

A tornado of flames whipped up around Lestina, rising to the heavens. The nearby vegetation was incinerated in an instant, and the few demons who had managed to weather the initial blow had their barriers blown away by Lestina’s more powerful firestorm.

“Punish the traitors. Hunt them all. This is all God’s will. Only by accepting his superiority can you find true happiness. Eliminate the heretics, lest you wish to see those you care about slain!”

Lestina could hear that voice echoing inside her head. A surge of faith welled up within her. Her thoughts were slowly being eroded by Ehit’s vision of “justice.” Her will as her own person grew weaker and weaker. Lestina had only just started feeling like coexistence might be possible, she hadn’t fully committed to it yet, so a powerful hypnosis spell had easily been able to swing the scales in her heart in the other direction. The only thing stopping her from losing herself completely was...

Rasul-sama...

The loyalty and love she felt toward her lord just barely kept her in check. She watched as Rasul erected a barrier and slowly but surely made his way over to her. As a result of the extreme faith that had been implanted in her, Lestina’s limiters had been removed, and she could no longer fully control her powers. In her head, she begged him not to get any closer, but at the same time, she couldn’t help but think, *Ah, I guess you, of all people, won’t stop just because someone tells you to.*

Rasul was the kind of man who’d willingly return to his country even knowing it was a suicidal act, all just to protect his people. There was no way he’d abandon someone who believed in him.

Surrounded by a sea of flames, Lestina drew her sword. After having killed so many of her comrades, she couldn’t bear to take the life of the one who mattered most to her.

“R-Rasul-sama...”

“Lestina! Wait! I’m going to save you!”

It was certainly possible that Rasul might be able to rescue her, but there was no guarantee, and if he failed, he would die...and that was the one thing Lestina couldn’t allow.

“I wish you luck.”

“Huh?! Wait, stop, don’t do anything stupid! That’s an order!”

Smiling, Lestina placed the blade against her own neck and said, “Farewell, my beloved Demon Lord.”

“Stoop!”

For the first time in her life, Lestina betrayed one of Rasul’s orders.

Rasul watched on helplessly, his hand outstretched, as Lestina slumped to the ground, blood spilling from her neck. The few surviving soldiers hurriedly worked to extinguish the flames, calling out to Rasul, who was still standing in the center of the conflagration. However, Rasul didn’t react at all. Meanwhile, the crazed shouts of zealots who’d found new prey could be heard in the distance...and there were quite a lot of them.

“Your Majesty, we must escape! At this rate, we’ll be overrun!” one of the soldiers shouted, trying and failing to penetrate the wall of flames. He went pale as he saw a massive horde of people crest a nearby hill and start sprinting down the slope.

“Brother!”

A blast of icy wind subdued the flames, and Rasul slowly looked up.

“Get a grip! Come on, climb up here!”

The wave of fanatics had nearly reached Rasul’s position. One of the demon soldiers shouted, “Forgive me, my lord!” and scooped Rasul up into his arms before getting onto Vandre’s back. Indeed, it had been the ice dragon Vandre’s breath that had extinguished the flames.

The other demon soldiers followed suit, while Vandre blocked the barrage of spells with an ice barrier. Then, as soon as everyone was on, he launched himself into the air.

The group flew through the night in silence. No one knew what to say to Rasul. The soldiers began to wonder if Lestina might have been more than just a loyal subordinate to him, considering how devastated he was by her loss. Perhaps he had loved her just as much as she had loved him.

After a long time, Rasul finally looked up and smiled sadly at Vandre, then said, “Thanks, Van. You’re a lifesaver.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t make it in time.”

“No, you did. You rescued the Demon Lord.”

Strength was returning to Rasul’s voice. Even if he had to force it, even if only a scant few people still followed him, so long as he was the Demon Lord, he couldn’t allow himself to give in to despair.

“Van, can you let me borrow a bit of Batlam? I need a part of him that can fly.”

“Don’t tell me you’re planning on returning to the castle?! Don’t.

You should come to the republic with us, brother.”

“Van, I am the Demon Lord,” Rasul replied, his tone gentle, but filled with such majesty that even Vandre felt like kneeling before him. The other soldiers must have felt the same way, as the resignation vanished from their faces, replaced by newfound resolve.

There might still have been demons left in Igdol who hadn’t been brainwashed. They might have been waiting for the Demon Lord to come save them. In which case, Rasul couldn’t abandon them.

“I’m going to do what I must. Make sure you do the same,” Rasul said in a stern voice, though he patted Vandre’s back as he did.

After a moment’s hesitation, Vandre asked, “You’re not planning on dying, are you?”

“Absolutely not. A precious subordinate of mine wished me luck, so I can’t afford to fail now.”

“Got it. Batlam, take care of him for me, all right?”

A slime oozed out of one of Vandre’s scales and wrapped itself around Rasul’s neck like a muffler.

“Van. I asked for a split of Batlam, not the main core...”

“I know you’re strong, brother, but even you can’t save the entirety of the demon empire on your own. Don’t forget that.”

Vandre was lending Rasul the real Batlam so that he’d turn back when things started to look too grim and live to return Batlam to him.

Rasul saw right through Vandre’s scheme and chuckled a little as he nodded. He then threw the muffler into the air, and after a second, it transformed into a wyvern.

Rasul and his men jumped onto the wyvern, and for a while, the two of them flew side by side.

“Don’t mess this up, brother.”

“I could say the same to you, Van. I’ll see you soon.”

The two brothers exchanged glances, vowing to meet again, then split up and went their separate ways.

A line of people headed south through the Obsidian Tundra. They were just a few dozen kilometers from the edge of the Pale Forest, and for once, a blizzard wasn’t blowing through the area. They were all residents of Sainttown. A pack of ice wolves was dragging sleds large enough to carry ten people apiece.

Margaretta and the other members of the Schnee clan were flying over the group, riding Vandre’s wyverns.

“Do you feel cold, Corrin?”

“Don’t worry, Ruth-onii-chan, I’m fine.”

The two of them were riding atop one of the sleds, both of them decked out in winter gear.

Corrin smiled at Ruth, but Ruth could easily tell it was forced, so

his expression darkened. He was pale, and not because of the cold.

Not everyone had made it out of Sainttown. About half of the non-combatants belonging to the former Reisen village were still there, along with the test subjects Miledi had rescued from the demon empire. Of course, the Odion Federation's mass invasion of the Pale Forest was still ongoing, so the people who'd stayed behind had done so to serve as bait.

Even with the defenses set around the village, it was only a matter of time before it was found. Furthermore, yesterday, they'd lost contact with the republic, as well as the other Liberator branches.

After some debate, they'd decided the safest place to retreat to was probably the Obsidian Tundra. The original plan, if anything happened to Sainttown, had been to run south, and Oscar had even left behind cold-weather gear and clothing for the residents. It was a long trek, but the Schnee clan's village was in the tundra.

It had made sense as an evacuation location, but two unforeseen problems had arisen when the residents of Sainttown had started making preparations to leave. First of all, they realized a group three hundred large couldn't travel stealthily enough to hide all their tracks. Secondly, they'd be quite slow, which was why the former test subjects had volunteered to stay behind as bait. Some of the hardier regular citizens had offered to remain behind as well, claiming that the soldiers would get suspicious if they found a village of only warriors. Right now, the group that had stayed behind was running around the forest, trying to trick the federation soldiers into thinking they were the sole residents of Sainttown.

"Everyone's still alive, right? We'll get to see them again, won't we?" Corrin asked, unable to help herself.

Yunfa, who was riding on the sled in front of them, turned back and replied in a loud voice, "Of course we will! They're all perverts who're obsessed with you. They won't die even if you kill them!"

"Yunfa! That's rude!" Susha said, scolding her sister.

The adults riding on the other sleds, including Moorin, all laughed. Seeing everyone else acting normal, Corrin felt a little relieved.

"Sheesh, you really... Hm? What's that?" Ruth mumbled as he looked up at the sky, seemingly spotting something. Margaretta and the others, who'd been keeping watch over the skies, also seemed to have noticed it. They were pointing at a cliff on one of the mountains in the distance. That mountain was along their route, and originally, the plan had been to detour around it and then travel along the valleys to avoid detection.

A second later, a breath attack shot out from that cliff toward the sky. Panicking, Margaretta quickly descended to where the sleds were.

“Everyone, head southwest! Hide in the forest there! We’ve been ambushed!”

That’s impossible! everyone thought at once, but then the scout Margaretta had sent out ahead came flying back from the cliff.

A fleet of the Grandort Empire’s airships was hot on his heels, but that wasn’t even the most surprising thing.

“That’s the demon army! Grandort and the demon empire have joined forces! Run! We’ll buy you guys time!” Margaretta shouted, then ordered her unit to attack.

Before anyone could get another word in, the ice wolves changed direction and began running as fast as they could. Margaretta couldn’t protect everyone in an open plain like this one, so it made sense for her to act as a decoy while Ruth and the others ran, but even so, she was up against an entire fleet of airships.

“Dammit, why are they here?! This is the Obsidian Tundra! Who would wait here in the freezing cold just to ambush insignificant nobodies like us?! They couldn’t even have been sure we’d come here!” Ruth shouted.

In truth, the empire hadn’t been waiting here to ambush them specifically. They’d just figured that once the invasion of the Haltina Republic began, people might try to flee north or south, so they had left forces to deal with anyone who did.

The Grandort Empire had its hands full hunting the mavericks within the forest, so they’d joined forces with the demon army to blockade the Obsidian Tundra, so it was demons who were riding those Grandort airships.

Ruth looked back and saw that the battle had already begun. Margaretta and her unit had managed to beat even the Paragons of Light, so he believed they would win, even if they had to stick to non-lethal methods of attack.

Soon enough, the wolves reached the entrance to the icy forest.

“Ah... Ruuuuuuuuuuuun!”

By the time Ruth and the others looked up, it was already too late. Blazing fireballs were raining down straight toward them.

While the airships had been waiting on the other side of the mountains, not all the demons had been on them. There had been another unit waiting in the forest, as that was the most likely place anyone would run if they were caught out on the plains.

The wolves did their best to avoid getting hit, and also used their special magic to deploy ice barriers. However, a second later, a series of shock waves assailed Ruth and the others. Everyone was thrown off their sleds and they rolled across the snow, though some slammed directly into nearby trees.

Rising steam obscured visibility, and Ruth heard an ominous

series of noises. It sounded like something was crumbling, after which a huge shock wave rippled across the ground.

“Corrin, are you okay?! Corrin!”

Ruth had instinctively hugged Corrin at the moment of impact, so the two hadn’t been separated. Fortunately, it looked like she hadn’t been injured in the fall either.

“Ngh, I-I’m all right,” Corrin replied, raising herself into a sitting position.

Ruth breathed a sigh of relief, then the two of them quickly scanned their surroundings. Luckily, the sled Dylan and Katy had been on was unharmed. It seemed the adults had protected it. Susha and Yunfa were a short distance away as well. They’d been knocked off their sled, but both of them seemed conscious.

Unfortunately, when he turned to see what had become of the people behind him, Ruth fell into the depths of despair. The earth had been split. There was a ten-meter fissure between him and the other side. This giant fissure had completely split the party. The concentrated barrage had destroyed the layer of snow covering this ancient valley, so now there was nothing to bridge the gap. The few sleds that’d been directly above the fissure were, of course, tumbling to the ground below.

“M-Mom...”

And Moorin just so happened to be on one of those falling sleds. Her eyes met Ruth’s. Knowing he couldn’t reach her, Ruth nevertheless tried to stretch his arm out to her. Moorin smiled slightly, then shook her head.

“Don’t look,” she said, and Ruth hugged Corrin so tightly she wouldn’t be able to watch as Moorin disappeared into the valley below.

“No, this can’t be...” Corrin muttered in a trembling voice.

Sadly, this crazed world didn’t even give the two siblings time to grieve. There was a series of war cries, and then the members of the demon army hiding within the forest charged at the disorganized group.

The few former test subjects who’d elected to go with the group as guards tried to fend off the demons, but there were only fifty of them and nearly a thousand demon soldiers. If they didn’t find more favorable terrain, they’d be overwhelmed soon. Seeing the writing on the wall, one of the chimera warriors shouted, “Get out of here, kids!”

Until Meiru and Laus had healed her, the unfortunate demon woman had been an empty husk who’d muttered incomprehensible things to herself. But now, she was reaching into the sled packed to the brim with Oscar’s enchanted swords and pulling out weapons to help her fight back.

Another former test subject who'd been just as beaten down as the woman from earlier flashed Ruth a smile, then charged toward the demon army.

"W-Wait! You'll die if you fight them! No one asked you to go that far for us!"

"And no one asked you to save us and treat us so kindly!"

The kindness Corrin and the others had shown them gave the chimera test subjects a reason to fight again. They wanted to do what they could to repay the Liberators who'd rescued them from hell and the children who'd made life worth living again.

"Stop! Stop! We didn't treat your injuries so you could die!" Corrin shouted in a pained voice.

The adults who couldn't fight hurried up and gathered the sleds that were still intact, then started loading everyone onto them.

"If we could just fix the sleds...!" Ruth shouted, running to one of the shattered sleds. The ice wolves were fast enough that anyone who couldn't fly wouldn't be able to keep up with them, which meant if Ruth could repair enough of the broken sleds, they'd be able to take the former test subjects with them.

Unfortunately, the Liberators were far too outnumbered. Determination alone couldn't change that. Some of the demons' spells made it past the chimera warriors' defenses, and one of them landed right next to Ruth. The explosion momentarily deafened Ruth, and his head swam from the impact. Through his blurry vision, he could see Corrin running toward him.

Susha was huddling over Yunfa, trying to protect her younger sister from any stray explosions. A dozen or so demon soldiers managed to make it past the chimera warriors, and two of them beelined straight for Susha and Yunfa. The adults and the ice wolves tried to intercept the demons, but they were blocked by the other demon soldiers that had made it past. Then, another demon made it through and started heading for Corrin.

"Big brother, please save Corrin and the others! Pleeeeeeease!" Ruth shouted, praying that Oscar would show up.

Right before Corrin was run through by a spear, someone stepped in and blocked the thrust with their sword.

"Unfortunately I'm not Oscar-nii-san, but technically, I am your big brother, so hopefully I'll do."

With a twirl, the fighter smacked the demon with the flat of his blade, knocking him unconscious. Ruth and Corrin watched in amazement.

"D-D-D-Dylan?!"

It was indeed Dylan who'd stepped in to knock out the demon and save Corrin...and he wasn't the only one either.

“What am I, chopped liver?”

“Katy?!” Corrin exclaimed.

Looking over, she saw that Katy had sliced through the tendons of the demons that had gone to attack Sussha and Yunfa. She was wielding one of the enchanted swords that Oscar had mass-produced.

“K-Katy-chan? Th-Thank you.”

“Umm, thank...you? Katy-san?”

“He he, you’re welcome!” Katy said with a smug grin, brushing her twintails back. The two of them sounded just like their usual selves, but they also looked like seasoned warriors, just as they had when their souls had been hijacked.

“It is you two in there, right, Katy? Dylan-onii-chan?” Corrin asked hesitantly. If their warrior skills had reawakened, then that was well and good, but it’d be a problem if their personalities had been destroyed again because of it.

Dylan and Katy smiled wryly as they replied to that question.

“Well, it’s us, but we still have the souls of old warriors mixed within us somewhere.”

“We haven’t *just* been sleeping this whole time, you know?”

The two of them cut through the barrage of fireballs like it was nothing. Even with the mana-severing properties of Oscar’s swords, that still wasn’t an easy feat.

The adults watched in awe as Dylan and Katy danced across the battlefield. Of course, they’d known that everyone would awaken eventually thanks to Oscar’s artifact, but it should have taken them another five months. All of the other children who’d similarly had their souls tampered with were still sleeping, so no one was expecting *them* to suddenly wake up and turn the tide of the battle.

Ever since Meiru had first started using restoration magic on them, Dylan and Katy had been training within the confines of their minds, absorbing the memories and experiences of the warriors whose souls resided in their bodies.

“We’ll explain later, but first, we need to get out of here,” Dylan said.

“Corrin, get everyone inside the ice wall while we buy time!” Katy shouted.

For now, Dylan and Katy were managing to fend off the demons who made it past the chimera warriors. But even with their superhuman abilities, it was only a matter of time before they were overwhelmed due to the sheer difference in numbers.

The adults hurriedly loaded injured kids onto the sleds, and Sussha rushed over to help. Ruth continued working on repairing as many sleds as he could, while Corrin and Yunfa got on one of them.

Suddenly, there was a massive explosion to the east and a ball of

flames rose into the sky. A shock wave strong enough to flatten the frozen trees rippled across the forest. Everyone dropped to the ground to avoid being blown away.

“Isn’t that where Margaretta-san and the others are fighting?!”

Before anyone could think to go check what had happened to them, everyone heard a low rumbling noise...and one of the men paled.

“It’s an avalanche! The explosion destabilized the mountainside!”

The ice wolves took the sleds that could already move and started running.

“Ruth, that’s enough! Come back!” one of the adults shouted. Even if he did manage to repair more of them, the chimera warriors no longer had any way to get back in time.

“Goddammit!” he shouted, running back to the sled Corrin and the others were on with tears in his eyes.

A few seconds later, the front line was swallowed whole by the avalanche. Dylan and Katy hurried back to the sleds as well.

There wasn’t a moment to lose. However, right before they set off, Yunfa looked around at the other sleds and shouted, “Sue-nee?! Sue-nee, where are you?!”

Surprised, everyone else looked around as well. They’d seen Susha helping the adults gather people, but none of them had seen her board a sled herself. Turning toward the crevasse, they saw her head and one arm poking out over the edge. The explosion had knocked her into the chasm. She didn’t have the strength to pull herself up and was struggling just to keep hanging on.

Susha turned to look at the advancing avalanche.

“I’m coming to save you, Sue-nee, just wait!” Yunfa exclaimed as she tried to jump out of the sled. However, Corrin and the adults held her back with pained expressions on their faces.

“Don’t!” Susha shouted in such a stern voice that Yunfa stopped struggling. Yunfa and Susha then locked eyes, and Susha smiled lovingly at her younger sister.

Yunfa paled as she realized what Susha was about to do.

“Take care of Naiz-sama for me, okay?” Susha said...and let go of the cliff.

“Noo!” Yunfa shouted as Susha vanished into the depths of the chasm. Corrin hugged Yunfa tightly as the ice wolves pulled the sleds away from the oncoming avalanche, crying all the while.

They had survived, but at a great cost. And all of this happened just one day before Oscar and Naiz found them.

Chapter V: A Promise to the Future

The sun began to sink, and while the sunset normally looked stunning, today it made it seem like the world was on fire.

Biting her lip for the hundredth time, Miledi looked over at Meiru and Laus as the three of them flew over the continent. Both of them were looking resolutely forward, but Miledi could clearly see the sorrow in their eyes and the pain in their expressions, so she couldn't think of anything to say to either of them.

Both Meiru and Laus had lost people they cared about, so nothing she said could possibly provide any comfort. The only good news they'd found was that Sharm and Reinheit had managed to escape from the Dragon Kingdom. They'd also managed to rescue Diene, who was currently nestled in Meiru's arms.

"Lau-chan. I'm sure Sharm-kun's fine, so..." Miledi trailed off, unsure how to finish. She wanted to say that as long as Reinheit and Nieshika were with Sharm, there was no way he'd died, but there was no real guarantee that was the case. They had already made the mistake of assuming there was no way Ehit would be able to hurt anyone in the Dragon Kingdom, and many of their comrades had perished as a result.

Miledi and the others had found the Melusine in the valley between the mountains. It had been a complete wreck, and Salus, Mikaela, and every other Liberator on board was dead. Laus's spirit magic could only bring back people within a few hours after their death, and even with the help of Lyutillis's evolution magic, he couldn't extend that time limit beyond half a day. Unfortunately, it had been days since Salus and the others had died, meaning there had been no way of reviving them. All they had been able to do was review scenes of the past to see what had happened. They'd seen how the Melusine had been attacked by the very same dragonmen the Liberators had trusted, and how Salus had left behind a final warning, knowing that Meiru would use restoration magic later to recreate the scene.

Upon rushing to the Dragon Kingdom, Miledi had found Tragdi, Grice, and several other dragonmen generals crucified to the palace. Most of the citizens were in chains, but the Dragon Kingdom's new ruler, Shival, had been giving a speech about the bright future that awaited the dragonmen race. She'd had apostles and knights by her

side, and the younger citizens who weren't in chains had all been cheering on her speech. It had been such a nightmarish scene that it had taken Miledi time to comprehend what had even happened.

Fortunately, Meiru had at least been able to use restoration magic to recreate the past and discover that many other dragonmen had managed to flee the capital and were hiding out in the mountains.

That was also how they'd discovered that Nieshika had evacuated Sharm and Reinheit.

"Miledi, you don't need to comfort me," Laus said in a hoarse voice. "I'm not the only one who's lost my family."

Salus and the others had been like family to Miledi, so she felt the pain of their loss keenly.

"Besides, Salus, Karg, and Grice-dono all fulfilled their duty splendidly."

Miledi didn't even want to think about how she'd break the news to Oscar, or how Vandre would feel knowing the grandfather he'd just been reunited with was dead.

Miledi had, of course, seen their final moments...and one thing was for sure, none of them had given their lives in vain.

"Kaime and Selm made their choice of their own free will. You saw how they looked. I've never seen them look so satisfied," Laus stated.

Kaime and Selm had fought against Darrion and his apostleified knights to the very end. Licoris and Debra had clung to their faith and attacked their two sons upon Darrion's orders, but Kaime and Selm had remained steadfast. They'd fought against the church that had been their whole life with unwavering resolve.

Their valiant struggle had kept Darrion and the knights stuck in the Dragon Kingdom until Tragdi himself was slain and the kingdom was fully overrun. It wasn't just Sharm and Reinheit who they'd saved with their actions; many other dragonmen had managed to flee thanks to them. Still, that didn't make it any easier to accept their deaths.

Miledi vividly remembered how Laus had cried as he'd cradled their mangled corpses. They didn't have the time to take Kaime and Selm's corpses back, so Laus had dug a family grave for them in a nearby grove. Miledi had never seen him look as defeated as he had in that moment. For the very first time, the strongest knight, who'd shouldered countless burdens without a word of complaint, had looked like a tired old man.

As the Liberators' leader, Miledi felt as though she had to say *something*.

"I'll say it again. You don't have to comfort me. I... I'm..." Laus trailed off, his voice trembling with emotion.

"I'm proud of them."

“I know...” Miledi said with a nod, holding back tears.

“You’re proud of your family too, aren’t you, Meiru?” Laus asked, prompting Meiru to look off into the distance.

“You know...”

Meiru thought back to when they’d been on their way to the Dragon Kingdom and passed over the mountains where her pirate crew had been hiding. They’d found a mound of corpses there, all belonging to her own men. Meiru had, of course, used restoration magic to see what had happened, but...

“It’s no use. There are too many of them!”

“We’re surrounded! There’s nowhere to run!”

“We’ll act as bait! Find somewhere to hide in the meantime!”

“Diene, that’s enough! If you use any more renewal magic, you’ll die!”

“This is an order from your first mate! Kyaty, take Diene and get out of here!”

She’d seen as they’d fought on desperately, and after realizing that they couldn’t survive, sacrificed themselves to let at least Diene escape.

Meiru would never forget the half-crying, half-smiling face Kyaty had made when she’d accepted Chris’s orders and slung a kicking and screaming Diene over her shoulder. Ignoring Diene’s protests that she was a member of the same pirate crew and that they would all die together, Kyaty had rushed through the hordes of soldiers to ferry her to safety.

“Sorry, Captain. But, it looks like I’ll be dying ahead of you. I’ll make sure to protect our princess though, so I hope you’ll forgive me.”

That had been the last thing Chris had said. And indeed, the Melusine pirate crew had successfully protected Diene.

Meiru had found Kyaty and Diene in a cave behind a waterfall near the summit of one of the mountains. Kyaty had been slumped on the ground, with numerous arrows in her back. Even after taking numerous fatal injuries, however, she’d continued running until she’d managed to bring Diene somewhere safe. She’d protected her best friend’s, Meiru’s, precious sister until the moment of her death.

Diene, who’d been underneath Kyaty’s body, had been completely unhurt. She’d tried desperately to bring Kyaty back with renewal magic to the point that she’d exhausted herself to the soul. Luckily, though, there hadn’t been a scratch on her body.

After Meiru and Laus had healed her, the first thing Diene had said upon waking up was, “I’m sorry, Nee-sama. I couldn’t protect everyone.”

She’d apologized over and over, crying all the while. And once she’d cried her heart out, she’d fallen back asleep, and though a day

had passed, she still hadn't woken back up.

"None of the corpses belonged to the dukedom's soldiers," Meiru said in a small voice. Despite their predicament, her pirate crew had stayed true to their beliefs as Liberators and refused to kill anyone not directly associated with the church.

"They really were a bunch of idiots."

Meiru couldn't help but wonder why a group of outlaws had stuck so hard to their principles. She couldn't help but wish they'd abandoned their lofty ideals and chosen to fight to survive instead.

If only they were still alive...

"Now that they're dead, I can't even punish them for leaving me behind."

"Meru-nee..."

It was the Liberators' creed that had killed Melusine's crew. And so, seeing Meiru bury her face in Diene's hair, Miledi couldn't think of anything to say. All she could do was bite her lip again, drawing blood.

"I'm sorry, Miledi-chan. I'm a failure of a Liberator."

"No, that's not true! I'm the one who—!"

Miledi flew over to Meiru's side, but Meiru brushed Miledi's bloodied lips with her fingers to cut her off.

Meiru's sunset-orange mana, which seemed oddly distinct from the color of the ongoing sunset, bathed Miledi's lips, healing the cuts.

"Laus-kun is right. I'm proud of them."

Chris and the others had given their lives for a dream bigger than themselves. If Meiru—their captain—couldn't be proud of them, then who would?

Meiru smiled sadly, and Miledi took the girl's hand and pressed it against her cheek. She then squeezed her eyes shut and gritted her teeth as hard as she could.

"We need to hurry, Miledi. We can mourn and reminisce once all of this is over," Laus said.

"He's right. First, we'll need to rendezvous at the Pale Forest."

The Liberators needed a new base of operations from which to decide whether to continue their rescue efforts or focus their resources elsewhere.

The few sane dragonmen they'd managed to rescue were set to reach the forest in a few days as well. They'd told Miledi and the others to go on ahead because they knew they'd just slow her down.

Miledi had agreed mostly because if the Dragon Kingdom was in such a sorry state, there was no guarantee the republic was any safer, so she wanted to make sure it was before bringing refugees there.

Lyutillis had headed back to the forest ahead of everyone else, since she was nigh-invincible with the sacred tree's strength behind

her, but even with that, Miledi couldn't be sure the republic was safe.

The situation was growing worse by the minute as well, with more and more of the Liberators being hunted down even as Miledi rushed to and fro to save who she could. She couldn't help but wish the compass would show her what the situation was like where she wanted to go, on top of pointing her in the right direction.

"Please be safe, guys," Miledi said, praying for the safety of those still alive as she sped toward the forest at the speed of sound.

Miledi, Meiru, and Laus reached the republic that same night. As they passed over the White Scarred Plains, they saw millions upon millions of campfires. Even more people were streaming toward the plains from the west as well.

"Well, at least it looks like Lyu managed to kick them out with her barrier," Miledi muttered.

There were so many fires that the sky was bright even in the middle of the night. Soldiers kept trying to push into the forest, only to find themselves walking back out, confused. The Pale Forest was once again successfully misdirecting all those who entered.

Miledi and the others breathed a small sigh of relief upon seeing that. It was short-lived, however. The moment Miledi flew into the capital, she saw the destroyed houses, the rows of dead covered by traditional funeral leaves, and the burned-down trees. Rescue workers were still coming back with more corpses too.

The city was filled with the wails of bereaved family members and loved ones.

"Ah..." Miledi gasped when she saw the faces of some of the corpses under the shadow of the sacred tree. Badd, Marshal, Shushu, Valf, Reinheit, and even Nieshika.

"It can't be...Reinheit!"

Laus ran over to Reinheit, his face pale. It was at that point that other people started to notice that Miledi and the others had returned.

Hoping against hope, Laus used spirit magic to see if any trace of Reinheit's soul remained in his corpse. But of course, it didn't. Thinking he might be able to at least save *someone*, Laus looked over Badd and the others as well, but the results were the same. All of their souls had passed on without a trace. They were well and truly dead.

Others began gathering around Meiru and Laus, perhaps hoping that the ancient magic users would be able to save their loved ones. Before they could ask anything though, a voice called down to Miledi and the others from above.

"Good, you made it in time," Lyutillis said.

Laus rounded on her, ready to lash out. How could she say that when they'd clearly been too late for Reinheit and the others? But when he saw her dignified expression, those words died in his throat.

“Hurry, to the palace! You might still be able to save them!”

Laus felt as though he'd just been slapped. He couldn't believe he'd let his emotions get the better of him when there were still people who needed his help.

Miledi and the others exchanged glances, then flew into the throne room from the balcony. The wide-open space had been converted into a field hospital, and Oscar, Naiz, Baharl, Corrin, and many other familiar faces were there. All of them had their hands full treating the wounded. When they saw Miledi and the others, they gave them a relieved smile, but that was all.

There wasn't any time for lengthy reunions. Lyutillis pointed to a corner of the throne room.

“Only half a day has passed! Hurry!”

Lyutillis cast her evolution magic on both Laus and Meiru, while Laus stared at the corner in shock.

“Sh-Sharm!”

Lying in that corner was Sharm, along with Prime Minister Parsha and Craid and his royal guard. He didn't need to get any closer to tell that their souls were still hanging on by a thread.

“I'll bring them all back at once. Limit Break! Soul Revival!”

Laus's glittering, jet-black mana covered Sharm and the others like a veil of pure night.

“I'll do the same. Tetragrammaton!”

Meiru's bright orange mana spread out in ripples.

Everyone gathered in this room were either on the verge of death or had just died, meaning they were all people who could be cured only by Meiru and Laus. The color began to return to those who'd recently passed away, and everyone's bodies were repaired to their original state.

With a cough, Sharm and the others started breathing again. It would be some time before they would wake up, but they were most definitely alive. Those who'd just been mortally injured were able to get back up immediately, however.

Tears of joy streamed down many of their faces, and the beastmen all gathered around Laus and Meiru, thanking them profusely.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Miledi went over to Oscar and Naiz. But as she got closer, her eyes widened in surprise.

“Dylan-kun?! Katy-chan?!”

“Long time no see, Miledi-san... Actually, I guess that's not quite right, huh?” Dylan said with an awkward smile. Katy smiled as well, but it was no longer the innocent smile of a young girl who had trouble being honest with herself. Miledi knew she should be happy they were awake, but she couldn't help but feel a sense of melancholy.

“The two of them awakened in order to help Ruth and Corrin

escape. They've inherited the skills of the ancient warriors whose souls were implanted in their bodies," Oscar said in a proud voice, patting Dylan and Katy's heads. Though, he still couldn't hide the flicker of sorrow that passed through his eyes.

Heart pounding, Miledi looked around to see who was missing. Ruth was a short distance away, and he waved when he saw Miledi looking at her. Corrin was sitting close by him, and Miledi could see that her eyes were red. Naiz was in a corner, a sleeping Yunfa cradled delicately in his arms.

"W-Wait...where's Sue-chan?" Miledi asked, prompting everyone to look away sadly.

"No..." Miledi muttered. She couldn't believe it. She didn't want to believe it. But then Yunfa woke up, looked blearily around, and started sobbing into Naiz's chest.

"Naiz-sama. Sue-nee, she, she— Naiz-samaaa!"

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry I couldn't make it in time."

Naiz hugged her tightly and she hugged him back.

Miledi staggered backward, and Oscar put a supporting hand on her back as she asked, "Wh-What about everyone else?"

"We didn't lose everyone. People who aren't gravely injured are resting in one of the other rooms."

"Moorin's okay, right?"

Oscar shook his head silently, making Miledi visible pale.

"I-I have more bad news. At the Dragon Kingdom—"

"I know," Oscar replied, cutting her off. "Shirley told us everything."

He then looked into Miledi's eyes, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"He really was a master synergist. Even with a hole in his side, he was still able to repair my artifact and protect everyone. Isn't that right?"

"Yeah... Yeah, he did."

Dylan and Katy hugged both Oscar and Miledi.

Out of the corner of her eyes, Miledi could see Meiru handing Diene over to Baharl. For a moment, he hugged Diene tight, then after seeing Meiru's despondent expression, he wrapped his arms around Meiru as well and lent her his shoulder. At first, Meiru tried to pull away, but then he whispered something into her ear and she let him hug her. Her shoulders were trembling, and it was clear that she was crying.

Upon seeing that, Oscar and the others realized why it was only Diene who had come back with Meiru. Everyone gritted their teeth as another wave of despair washed over them.

After a few minutes of silent grieving, Lyutillis clapped her hands

and said, “Everyone, we need to get moving. The situation is still dire.”

Her commanding voice reenergized everyone.

Miledi took a deep breath, nodded to herself, then looked around the room and said, “We need to come up with a more effective rescue strategy. Let’s start by exchanging information. Van-chan’s not back yet, so—”

Before Miledi could say someone should go look for him, Lyutillis replied, “There won’t be any need for that. It seems he’s just returned.”

Vandre had gone to rescue Rasul, and to find out the fate of the spy unit the Liberators had sent into the theocracy. His link with Kuou allowed him to easily track his familiar, so he might have learned something useful.

Nodding to each other, Miledi and the others headed outside. In the distance, they could see an ice dragon descending from the sky, the mists parting to allow him entry. Kuou was riding on his back, and though there were no members of the spy unit with him, he had brought someone back.

“Kia-chan?!” Miledi shouted, recognizing the bunny girl.

The moment Kiara saw Miledi, all the emotions she’d bottled up came flowing out and she burst into tears. She was carrying someone in her arms, and when Miledi lowered the two of them down with gravity magic, she saw who it was.

“Sui?” Lyutillis muttered. There was no snide, biting reply.

“The spy unit was wiped out. Sui fought an apostle by herself to help Kiara escape,” Vandre explained, canceling his transformation.

Everyone looked down at Sui’s corpse in shock, and Kiara shouted, “She protected me!”

Kiara then cast her tearful gaze over the assembled beastmen. She wanted to make sure all the warriors of the republic heard Sui’s final words.

“She said that rabbitmen were strong! That even if we can’t win right now, as long as we survive, eventually, we’ll be the ones to transform the world. She died smiling!”

Kiara’s voice echoed through the forest. The surviving members of Sui’s covert ops squad gathered around Kiara and looked down at their deceased commander through their masks.

After a moment of silence, one of them muttered, “Man, you were annoying to the very end.”

Thinking that he was insulting Sui, Kiara glared up at him. But then, she saw the look in his eyes.

“You did everything by yourself, and then you went and died by yourself too. How selfish can you get?”

“You really were the worst general in history. The whole time I was working for you, I was trying to find a way to get you fired.”

“You were such a pain that even an apostle couldn’t ignore you. Your shitty personality’s definitely going down in history.”

“I can’t believe you look so peaceful.”

Though everyone was insulting her, Kiara could feel the warmth in their words. The members of Sui’s unit all took their masks off simultaneously, and Kiara saw tears streaming down their faces.

“Salute the Haltina Republic’s greatest hero!” one of the men shouted, putting a hand on his chest. The other beastmen straightened their backs and followed suit, all of them closing their eyes.

“Miss. Thank you for bringing our general back home,” one of them said, turning to Kiara. She sobbed even harder, and Miledi hugged her and Sui both. Miledi didn’t bother asking about Kiara’s parents. If they weren’t here, it was obvious what had happened to them.

“Welcome home, Sui. The Pale Forest will never forget what you’ve done for it,” Lyutillis said in a solemn voice, patting Sui’s head. “May you rest in peace.”

Vandre watched on from a distance, while Oscar, Naiz, and the children looked like they were at a loss for words.

Just then, one of the Schnee clansmen that had been helping recover corpses near the capital gate came running over, shouting, “Van-sama!”

Van’s eyes nearly popped out of his skull when he saw that it was Margaretta, of all people. He thought he’d lost her forever, but here she was.

“Van-sama, I’m sorry for—”

Vandre hugged her tight, cutting her off.

“Huh? Wha—?!” she exclaimed. Tordretta and the others had never seen Margaretta so flustered before.

“I thought you were dead.”

“Is that because you felt your connection with Uruluk fade?”

“Yeah. If something managed to kill him, I didn’t think his rider would be able to survive it.”

Margaretta wrapped a bandaged arm around Vandre’s back, letting the warmth of her body prove to him that she was alive.

“My opponents blew themselves up,” she explained.

The demons riding on the three greatest airships the empire had ever built had poured enough mana into the engines to cause them to overheat and explode. The resulting explosion had been strong enough to carve a chunk out of the nearby mountain, and there was only one reason Margaretta and the others had survived.

“Just before the airships exploded, Uruluk threw me off and used

his body to shield all of us.”

“I see... So he protected his family to the very end, huh?”

“I’m sorry. I know he meant a lot to—”

“It’s fine. Say no more.”

Vandre gently patted Margareta’s trembling shoulder.

Unfortunately, Oscar had some bad news he had to deliver to Vandre.

“Van. Nieshika-san’s here.”

“What? So something *did* happen to the dragon...” Vandre trailed off when he saw the pained look on Oscar’s face.

Following Oscar’s gaze, Vandre saw Nieshika’s corpse next to Badd and the others. His expression stiffened.

“Wh-What happened?”

“I would like to know that myself,” Lyutillis said, striding forward. “I didn’t make it back to the republic in time. But when I did finally return, the barrier was already active.”

She paused there, then turned to look at Sharm, who was in Laus’s arms.

“Sharm-kun had somehow activated the fog barrier. He had the Holy Sword in his hands, and he looked like he was sleeping.”

“No way...” Miledi mumbled, disentangling herself from Kiara as she turned to Meiru. Meiru immediately cast restoration magic to see what had happened.

The party saw Badd leave his will behind, then pass away while still standing. They watched Marshal and the others struggle to keep the federation soldiers out until they, too, eventually fell. Then, just as soldiers started storming the palace, Sharm and Nieshika arrived. Nieshika shielded Sharm with her body. while the young boy used the Holy Sword to activate the forest’s barrier, then drop to his knees and pass out.

After that, the vision of the past faded away.

Lyutillis staggered over to Badd’s corpse and knelt in front of him. No one knew what she was thinking in that moment, but she took his cold hand in hers and closed her eyes.

Laus, likewise, knelt in front of Reinheit. He didn’t know exactly what had happened, but it was clear that Reinheit had given his life to protect Sharm’s and then passed both the Holy Sword and the title of hero down onto his charge.

“You were a far greater knight than either of us deserved. And Sharm, you’re the best son a father could have ever asked for.”

Meiru’s restoration magic confirmed that Sharm had maintained the barrier for a full two days. He’d foregone food and sleep, used up every last drop of his mana, and had started burning his own life force once that had run out. He’d been resolved to die, if that was what it took. He’d burned away his very soul to save others. He was worthy of

being called a hero, and thanks to the sacrifice of his loyal knight, Reinheit, he'd pulled off a miracle.

No, it wasn't just Reinheit's sacrifice that had made this possible. Every person at the foot of the sacred tree had fought and died for this miracle.

People started gathering around Miledi and the others to mourn those who had passed, and to thank them for their sacrifices. But of course, Ehit wasn't the kind of person to give them any time to rest.

"Something's coming!" Miledi shouted suddenly, and Oscar and the others noticed it a second later.

They recognized the presence pretty quickly—they'd seen plenty of apostles already. Not willing to wait for the apostle to come to them, Miledi and the others shot into the sky. They created platforms for themselves to stand on in mid-air and faced off against the apostle. However, the apostle maintained a healthy distance and made no move to attack.

"I have no intention of fighting you."

"Thought so. Not like a single one of you stands a chance against us anymore."

"I come bearing a message from my master."

Miledi had expected as much, which was why she hadn't instantly obliterated the apostle upon seeing it.

"Us apostles are capable of sharing the information we receive with each other."

As she spoke, the apostle spread her silver wings and unleashed hundreds of feathers into the sky. They formed a circle above her, coalescing into a magic circle.

"After studying your Skynets, we have derived a means of projecting that shared information for others to see," the apostle said as she created a couple dozen more magic circles. "This is what we are seeing all across the world right now."

The magic circles began to glow from within, each one projecting a different image. Miledi and the others paled when they realized what they were looking at.

"This is my lord's message."

"Stop."

The images showed various execution sites across the world.

"Stop!"

People Miledi recognized were chained up on those execution platforms. One of them had Nadia, Snowbell, and the other members of the desert village. Another showed Kipson and the other members of the village in the Fertile Land.

Mobs with torches surrounded every one of those execution sites. Miledi, Oscar, and the others all turned back to the apostle.

In an emotionless voice, she said, "Checkmate."

"Stoop!"

Torches were thrown onto the pyres, and the Liberators were forced to watch as their comrades were all burned at the stake. They were halfway across the continent, meaning that Laus couldn't possibly get there in time to save them.

“The hunts will continue, and the mortal races shall dance on the palm of our lord’s hand. He has tired of this civilization and will destroy it all to build a new one from its ashes. If you wish for him to stop, then give up your lives. Will you let yourselves be executed as traitors, or will you continue to fight and sacrifice the world in the process? Make your choice. Is this free will you love so much truly worth—?”

There was a small popping noise, and the apostle's corpse dropped to the ground. The feathers making up the projectors scattered, and the images vanished.

After a moment's silence, Miledi shouted,

"Ehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh it!"

Her rage had reached a boiling point, as had Oscar's and the others'.

“You’re fucking dead!”

That was the only reply Miledi and the others had for the god who had taken the entire world hostage.

Miledi and the others blazed through the night sky like shooting stars. Thanks to Miledi's supersonic flight and Naiz's teleportation, they were able to cross half the continent in just a few hours.

It was a few hours before dawn. The night had been long, but no night lasted forever. And tonight, the Liberators would fight to bring about the dawn they wished for.

“O-kun!”

“Got it!”

Oscar took aim with his Black Umbrella, pointing it at the sky directly above the Divine Mountain's summit. The compass had told them that this was the place where the boundary between Tortus and Ehit's Sanctuary was the thinnest. Oscar had fitted his umbrella with the Arrow of Boundaries, and once he'd locked onto his target, he fired.

“Shoot straight through to Ehit’s throne!”

The arrow shot straight up, leaving a rainbow-colored trail behind it. As it reached its destination, ripples of light spread out from it.

Cracks appeared in the sky, and a second later, there was the sound of shattering glass. A multicolored portal, wide enough for a few people to pass through at a time, appeared around the arrow. And

at the same time, countless whirlpools of silver light appeared, spitting out apostles. That, more than anything, was proof that the Arrow of Boundaries was capable of opening the way into Ehit's domain.

"Out of the way!" Miledi shouted, using an extremely powerful Heavencrush to obliterate three of those silver portals and crush any apostles around them.

"It's past time that you paid for your crimes—Unlimited Overdrive! Core Seal!" Lyutillis exclaimed, enveloping allies and enemies alike with her evolution magic, empowering Miledi and the others while weakening the apostles.

"This is what you deserve—Voidshatter!" Naiz roared, venting the anger he felt due to being unable to protect those he'd sworn to by annihilating a group of apostles with a powerful spatial explosion.

"If only you were capable of feeling pain, I would make you suffer a thousandfold for what you've done—Stagnation!" Meiru exclaimed, slowing down all of the remaining apostles and channeling her fury at losing her crew into her spell.

"I've had enough tragedy in my life!"

"We're putting an end to your twisted game!"

Oscar destroyed the apostles Meiru had slowed with a series of disintegration blasts, while Vandre rotted them from the inside out with Invasive Ruin.

"Get out here and fight us, you coward! If you have even a speck of pride, then stop hiding behind your dolls—Limit Break - Final Stage!"

Laus made two clones of himself and started crushing any apostles that got close with his war maces. Miledi flew past the broken corpses of the apostles, using her gravity magic to take Oscar and the others with her. Not even an endless stream of apostles could stop the seven ancient magic users now.

"Ehiiiiit!"

Just as Miledi and the others were about to pass through the multicolored gate, it vanished.

Not because the path to the Sanctuary had been closed, but rather because Ehit had chosen to open it all the way. The Liberators could see straight into Ehit's domain.

"Huh? Aaaaaaaaah!"

"Wha—? Ngh, s-stop!"

Miledi and the others had, of course, planned for a potential ambush the moment they passed through the gate. That was why they'd packed their concept magic into an arrow that could be fired remotely rather than a sword or some other weapon that needed to be swung at close range.

But who could have expected that it would be regular people waiting for them on the other side of the portal instead of apostles.

Miledi locked eyes with a young girl who looked scared out of her wits. She forcibly decelerated, which taxed her body quite a bit because of how fast she'd been going. Her innards churned, and Oscar and the others also stopped their attacks just in time with gritted teeth.

It was precisely because the Liberators had made saving people their primary goal that this was the one weakness Ehit could exploit. And it was also this weakness that sealed their fate.

Miledi and the others could hear war cries from down below. The teleportation circle that took people from the ground to the main cathedral had been repaired, and people were being teleported into the cathedral en masse. Those who were still sane were running around begging for mercy, while those who'd been fully brainwashed by Ehit chased them down and killed them. Furthermore, the people Ehit had brought into the Sanctuary suddenly started jumping off the edge of the gate.

The apostles fired lethal bursts of disintegration magic into the crowd, not caring about who they hit.

"Guys!" Miledi shouted, and Oscar and the others started moving immediately.

Miledi used gravity magic to save the people jumping to their deaths, while Laus used Soul Shock to knock out the fanatics. Meiru healed everyone who'd been mortally injured, while Naiz and Lyutillis erected barriers to protect people from the apostles' attacks and Oscar and Vandre set out to kill all the apostles.

However, because they were all preoccupied, they noticed all too late that the girl Miledi had first seen in the Sanctuary had picked up the arrow they'd fired. She looked completely expressionless now though, and her hair went from black to white in an instant.

"Are you willing to kill her to get this back?" the girl said in a low, gravelly voice that clearly wasn't hers. She grinned wickedly, and Miledi and the others immediately realized that Ehit had possessed her and was using her body as a shield. Ehit then hugged the arrow close and with a silver flash, destroyed it with disintegration magic.

Split in half, the arrow lost its rainbow aura, and Ehit tossed the broken ends away like they were nothing.

"Just how low can you stoop?!" Miledi screamed. However, she knew yelling wouldn't change anything. And so, she used gravity magic to call the broken halves of the arrow toward her, while the portal to the Sanctuary closed shut.

A second later, the apostles and all the crazed fanatics stopped moving.

“To think you would manage to acquire even concept magic,” Ehit said, his voice ringing out across the sky. “The seven of you truly are fascinating. I imagine you must have created a concept magic weapon capable of killing me as well?”

He’d guessed as much after seeing the Arrow of Boundaries.

Miledi ignored his question and tossed the arrow to Oscar. He and Meiru worked desperately to restore it, while Ehit’s booming laughter rang in their ears.

“Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Splendid! So your desire to slay me is that strong?! What a delight! Do your best to struggle and reach me while the world is destroyed around you!”

Oscar looked hopelessly up at Meiru. She was using all the restoration magic she knew, but judging by the despair in her expression, it wasn’t going to work.

“O-kun, Meru-nee!”

Meiru had managed to restore the arrow’s outward appearance, but it no longer gave off the unique signature concept magic did.

“But remember this, so long as you live, the world shall continue to plunge deeper into chaos! The crazed masses won’t just hunt down the Liberators, but even their own loved ones given enough time!”

As Ehit finished his speech, all the fanatics in the cathedral pointed their weapons at their own necks. Meanwhile, the apostles aimed their weapons at those who were still sane enough to not kill themselves.

“Why are you so cruel?! What drives you to do this?!” Miledi shouted.

“Miledi, we have to retreat!” Oscar said, grabbing Miledi’s arm.

“We already retreated once! I’m not running away again!” she replied, shaking him off. Tears welled up in her eyes, but she refused to shed them.

Oscar and the others understood exactly how she felt. They also wanted to say damn the consequences and go wild. But they knew they couldn’t. They were Liberators, after all.

Meiru and Lyutillis grabbed Miledi, while Naiz opened up a portal.

“We need to regroup,” Laus said, serving as the rearguard with Vandre while the others dragged Miledi through the portal.

Right before they left, Ehit said in a displeased voice, “Failing to understand me is what is truly evil, not what I do.”

That was the first time any of them had seen him display a negative emotion.

Miledi and the others returned to the forest where they were greeted by Ruth, Corrin, Dylan, Katy, and Sharm and Parsha, who’d

both woken up. None of them knew what to say, though.

“Oscar, Meiru! Is the arrow still not fixed?!” Miledi shouted. She was in such a foul mood that she wasn’t letting anyone touch her.

Sounding utterly defeated, Oscar said, “Miledi, we can’t repair it.”

“Why not?!”

“The concept magic contained within it was destroyed. Not even restoration magic can bring that back,” Meiru explained.

“Th-Then we just have to make another one! What are you waiting around for?!”

Laus walked over to Miledi and said, “Calm down.”

“You want me to calm down?! Even though hundreds of our comrades are being slaughtered as we speak?! Even though people might start killing themselves at any minute?! Even if they wipe out the Liberators, they won’t stop! They’ll just start killing each other! We need to at least rescue what little of our friends are still alive. We have the compass, so... No, wait...”

Miledi suddenly paled and started biting on her nails. She was one step away from falling into madness herself.

“I told you to calm down! Soul’s Repose!”

Laus’s magic washed over Miledi. Normally, she’d have the presence of mind to resist it if she wanted to, but right now, she was so distraught that she ate it head-on. Calming down a little, Miledi looked around and realized how immature she’d been acting. Seeing Corrin look so taken aback made her feel ashamed of herself.

It was obvious to everyone watching that Miledi wasn’t in her right mind and that they’d failed to kill Ehit.

A cold breeze blew through the trees as everyone waited silently for Miledi to say something. She staggered backward, feeling as though she’d betrayed everyone’s hopes.

No, it’s not what you guys think. We can still do it. We can still win. I’ll make it happen. I swear I’ll kill Ehit and change the world! Miledi tried to say as much, but she couldn’t get any words out of her throat. Her teeth started to chatter, and Oscar gently laid a hand on her shoulder.

“Miledi, lend me the compass.”

“The...compass?” Miledi parroted, handing the compass over. Oscar then gave it to Parsha.

“Can the surviving dragonmen, Schnee clansmen, and beastmen warriors focus on rescuing any surviving Liberators?” he asked.

What will you guys do?

Oscar could feel the question in everyone’s gazes.

“We’re going to try to recreate the concept magic that will let us enter Ehit’s Sanctuary. It’s going to take all of our concentration, so we won’t be able to help with the rescue effort.”

“Oscar!” Miledi shouted, glaring at Oscar. But then she noticed

that Oscar's hand was trembling as well, so she shut her mouth.

"I'll repair the Skynets we have left and make more to serve as relays for communications. Everyone, follow Parsha-san's orders. She'll organize things properly. Lyu, use your evolution magic on the search squad. Sharm-kun, I know this will be hard for you, but can you maintain the barrier in Lyu's place while we're gone?"

Everyone could tell that Oscar was doing his best to keep his emotions in check while he handed out orders.

"Ehit told us that once the Liberators are gone, regular people will start killing each other."

Parsha and the others gasped, the blood draining from their faces.

"We have to prevent that no matter what. Please lend us your assistance, everyone," Oscar said, bowing his head. And for a moment, there was complete silence.

It was Baharl who finally spoke up, saying, "Either way, I need to get back to Andika. If the city's still around, I plan to evacuate everyone I can. I doubt the nations on the mainland are willing to chase us that far out."

The next to say something was Sharm.

"I don't mind helping. Your Majesty, can you cast your evolution magic on me as well? The Holy Sword is telling me I'll be able to last seven days with that."

At that point, everyone started voicing their willingness to cooperate.

"We don't have much time, everyone! Let's get moving!" Parsha shouted, prompting Baharl and the others to set about their respective tasks.

"Miledi, let's go to the training ground we used to master our ancient magic. We'll have the least distractions there. Lyu and I will head over as soon as we've given everyone the things they need, so use that time to mentally reorient yourself."

"Got it. Also, sorry."

Oscar patted Miledi's head in response, then looked over at Meiru and said, "Take care of her for me."

"Of course. Let's go, Miledi-chan. This isn't over yet."

"You're right. There's no way I'm letting it end here."

Miledi lifted Meiru, Naiz, Vand्रे, and Laus with her gravity magic, then carried them all to the training grounds.

A full day passed without Miledi and the others managing to recreate the concept magic they wanted. Meanwhile, a dozen more of the Liberators' hidden villages were burned to the ground.

A second day passed, and the dragonmen refugees finally made it to the Pale Forest. By checking the compass, Miledi and the others

discovered that apostles and fanatics had attacked Dastia. They also heard that Rasul had been exiled from his own nation.

Three days went by and Miledi and the others were no closer to recreating concept magic. They'd done it the first time after getting dead drunk, so it wasn't like they had any real knowledge they could draw on. All they managed to make were inferior copies of their first arrow.

Their impatience grew, while the world finally started tilting toward destruction. The rage the zealots had directed toward the Liberators was now being directed at their neighbors. People began to wonder if maybe the person living next to them wasn't secretly a rebel supporter.

On the fourth day, the demon empire declared war on Dastia and launched an invasion. Grandort and Velnika began preparations to cross the Reisen Gorge and invade the demon empire as well. The Dragon Kingdom became a vassal state of the theocracy, and Shival's dragonmen began hunting down Liberators.

By the fifth day, every Liberator who wasn't part of the support branch or under Miledi and the others' direct protection was dead.

On day six, Miledi vanished.

There was a hidden grave on a cliff overlooking the ocean due east from Sainttown. The gravestone was a simple stone slab on the promontory.

Miledi stood before the gravestone, staring intently at the name etched into it—Belta Lievre.

"Belle, everyone's dead," she said in a voice quiet enough to be swallowed up by the white-crested waves crashing against the cliff wall.

"I couldn't do it."

They'd been *this* close to reaching Ehit, but in the end, they'd failed. The free world they'd dreamed about had proven to be beyond their reach.

"But you know what's weird? No one was mad at me."

Badd wasn't the only one who'd left his will behind, knowing that Meiru would be able to see into the past. Salus and the others had also left behind messages in various artifacts that had been recovered by the search squads Parsha sent out.

Badd had told her to live on even if they couldn't beat Ehit. Salus had told her he hoped she'd live her life as a normal girl from now on. Rigan had told her to find happiness. Howzer had told her that as long as the light of hope wasn't fully extinguished, that was good enough. Cloris, Jinglebell, Nadia, and all of the other Liberators had told her to survive, even as they were being executed.

“They want a powerless leader like me to survive?”

All of them had cared more about Miledi’s happiness than the revolution they’d devoted their lives to.

“There’s no way I can do that. How can I just go on like nothing’s happened when everyone else is dead?!”

Miledi dropped to her knees, wrapped her arms around the gravestone, and started sobbing.

“Belle...I want to see you again.”

In that moment, Miledi wasn’t the dazzlingly bright, ever-optimistic leader of the Liberators. Right now, she just looked like a girl who’d lost everyone she loved.

Miledi’s sobs echoed across the sea, drowning out the roar of the waves and wind.

It was hours later, when the sun had long since set and the moon was shining high in the sky, that Miledi finally rose to her feet.

“Thanks for listening to my whining, Belle,” she said, then traced the name on the gravestone with her slender fingers. “But in the end, I don’t think I have it in me to become a regular girl.”

Miledi smiled sadly, thinking about what could have been.

“I’ve decided, Belle.”

She knew who she was, and what she had to do.



Resolved, Miledi turned back toward the mainland. Her expression had completely transformed. There was no weakness or sorrow in it anymore, just firm, unyielding determination. Her eyes glimmered brighter than ever before.

As she took her first step, a gust of wind blew past her and, for a moment, it felt as though Miledi heard Belta's voice.

"Live, Miledi."

It might have just been a trick of the wind and waves, but Miledi could have sworn that was Belta's voice.

Stopping in her tracks, Miledi closed her eyes and replied, "Don't worry, I will. Even if...I'm the last one left."

Smiling faintly, Miledi resumed walking. She wouldn't look back ever again.

That same night, Miledi went to the closest church she could find from Sainttown. She sat down on a pew in the front row, and a priest sat down on the pew across the aisle from her.

"Ehit, I've come to bargain," she said.

The priest didn't respond, but Miledi knew Ehit was listening. There was no way he'd be able to resist the allure of something interesting.

"I've thought of a way to make your game a whole lot more interesting."

There was only one option Miledi could think of that would save the present world while still keeping hope alive for future generations.

After hearing Miledi's proposal, the priest's face transformed into the beautiful features of an apostle. There was an ugly smile on his face, and he added a series of cruel conditions to see whether or not Miledi would accept. However, Miledi wasn't fazed at all, and she accepted them all without complaint, with the exception of one which she negotiated slightly.

Ehit doubled over with laughter as the deal was struck, his ominous voice echoing through the church.

"This is the first time I've ever seen anyone make such a foolish choice. I doubt your companions will accept the terms of this contract."

"Oh, they will. I have faith in them. Though you probably can't understand that," Miledi replied in a cold voice.

Laughing even harder, Ehit said, "You should be proud, Miledi Reisen. You've piqued God's interest, something no one else has done before."

Not deigning to respond, Miledi rose to her feet and walked out of the church, Ehit's laughter following her as she left.

On this day, a deal between God and the Liberators was struck.

Once she left the town, Miledi came to a halt. Oscar and the others were standing in front of her, looking worried.

“Miledi...thank goodness. We were worried something might have happened when you suddenly headed toward Grandort,” Oscar said with a relieved sigh as he held the compass in one hand.

Oscar and the others had known where Miledi had gone the moment she’d disappeared, but they’d figured she wanted some time alone, so they hadn’t chased after her. But then she hadn’t returned even after sunset, and when they checked the compass, they saw that she was within the Grandort Empire, so they’d rushed over thinking something bad might have happened.

“Miledi, what are you—?” Laus stopped mid-question, overwhelmed by the sheer determination he saw in Miledi’s gaze. The others were similarly awed.

It was clear to everyone that Miledi had made a momentous decision.

“Sorry for leaving without saying anything,” Miledi said quietly.

Oscar instinctively knew he wouldn’t like what she was going to say next, so he hurriedly said, “Miledi, I’m sure we’ll be able to make another Arrow of Boundaries, so—”

“We can discuss that later, O-chan. Hear me out first.”

Oscar raised an eyebrow in surprise, and the others—especially Meiru—looked similarly shocked. There had been only one man around Miledi’s age that she’d used the -kun honorific for. It had been a subconscious expression of her desire to maybe have a normal romance with him someday, but that had seemingly changed.

“We’ll stand out here. Let’s at least return to the forest to talk,” Lyutillis said, and everyone nodded. They wanted to put off hearing whatever it was Miledi had to say for as long as possible.

No one said a word on the way back to the forest. It was only after they’d returned to the training ground near the capital and sat down in a circle that Miledi spoke.

“I made a deal with Ehit.”

“You what?!” Vandre said in a stunned voice. Oscar and the others were similarly stupefied.

Miledi then went on to explain the details of the deal, and Oscar and the others almost doubted their ears for a moment.

“Ehit said that he would spare this world if we died. He wanted to see if we’d sacrifice ourselves for the present, or sacrifice the present for the future, so I decided to make a third choice.”

Miledi had wanted to ensure the present was saved, while still preserving hope for the future. Thus, she’d come up with an

interesting enough way to do it that Ehit had decided to play along.

That method was none other than the Seven Labyrinths Project.

“We’re going to create a series of trials within our respective labyrinths, and pass on our ancient magic to anyone who manages to clear them.”

They already knew from their time in Dastia that it was possible to make a magic circle that read the memories of someone to see if they had cleared certain conditions and also pass on power and knowledge to them. They also knew that while it had taken their combined powers to create concept magic, the first hero, Darrion Kaus, had done it alone.

If anything, it was harder to bring forth concept magic with more people, since it meant syncing up different values, thoughts, and feelings into a single extreme expression of will. The fact that Miledi and the others had managed to create three different concept magic-imbued artifacts was proof that their bonds of trust were stronger than any in history. It was a miracle that they’d succeeded even once.

Regardless, that was why Miledi and the others would craft extremely difficult trials that would require an unbreakable will to clear.

“If we can pass all of our ancient magic onto a single person, it should be a lot easier for them to use concept magic.”

It was also possible that multiple people strong enough to clear the labyrinths would all appear in a single generation. And then, once someone managed to collect all seven ancient magic, Ehit would then play a new game with them.

As Miledi explained all of that, Oscar and the others had a revelation. Not about the trials, but the fact that they could just pass on their ancient magic to each other.

Noticing the change in their expressions, Miledi said in a sad voice, “We can give it a try, but I don’t think it will work. Since you all understand the true nature of your ancient magic, you should be able to tell that.”

Natural ancient magic users had the power to interfere with one of the fundamental laws of nature imprinted onto their souls at birth. However, that meant their souls were already “dyed” in such a way that they couldn’t be modified any further. Ironically, only ancient magic users were incapable of learning other ancient magic.

No one tried to refute Miledi’s claim, and their bitter expressions made it obvious they’d realized she was right.

“Besides, even if we could, Ehit wouldn’t allow it. He’s tired of playing with us, and he wants new pawns to mess around with.”

However, it was unlikely new pawns on the level of Miledi and the others would appear ever again. With each passing generation,

there were fewer and fewer people born with special magic, let alone those capable of using ancient magic, so Miledi's proposal to create a system where a new super-powerful ancient magic user might appear at any time had been quite appealing to Ehit.

"He's willing to give us a year per person, so seven years total, to make our labyrinths. In that time, he won't drive people to war. The church will claim victory over the rebels and stop their witch hunts as well."

That would be the end of the Liberators' story, as far as the public was concerned. Of course, Miledi and her six companions would still be at large, but people would return to their everyday lives, secure in the knowledge that the church had won.

If Miledi broke her agreement at any point in time, Ehit would immediately blanket Tortus in insanity once more and destroy the world for good.

"Then, after the seventh year ends and the labyrinths are built...Miledi Reisen will be executed to bring an end to the current game."

"Wait, why?!" Oscar shouted. He'd kept his tongue the whole time, but this was too much.

"Weren't we supposed to become the masters of our respective labyrinths?! Why do you need to die?!"

Meiru and the others also shot Miledi concerned looks, and she smiled sadly at them.

"There's no way that bastard would just agree without making some demands."

Ehit wanted Miledi Reisen to be executed to properly put an end to the Liberators' story. Then, after she was executed, her soul would be transferred to an undying vessel of her choice. After that, the seven ancient magic users would never be able to interact with each other or the outside world again.

"But I negotiated the terms a little. In exchange for staying at the bottom of my labyrinth for eternity, the rest of you will be able to pick just one person who you'll be allowed to interact with. There are a few other details, but that's the main gist of the deal."

"Like hell we're taking that deal," Oscar shouted, rising to his feet.

"Miledi, you need to calm down and think about this," Naiz said, glaring at her.

"Yes, this is a completely unreasonable deal, Miledi-chan," Meiru added.

"Precisely. Do you really think we'll allow you to suffer alone like that?" Lyutillis asked.

"There's no way we're accepting those terms," Vandre spat.

Only Laus said nothing. He simply hung his head, grimacing.

Unlike the others, he understood that this really was the best option, though that didn't make it any easier to accept. He didn't mind spending the rest of his life at the bottom of a labyrinth. It was forcing Miledi to spend eons waiting for a conclusion that might not ever come that he couldn't accept.

"Do we have any other choice?" Miledi asked resolutely, and Oscar and the others fell silent.

They hadn't even managed to actually fight Ehit, let alone kill him. So long as there were people held hostage within the Sanctuary, Oscar and the others would have a hard time making any progress. Moreover, the fact that Ehit had been willing to accept this deal meant that he was confident he could handily beat someone capable of using all seven ancient magic. Even if Miledi and the others *were* able to force a showdown with Ehit, there was no guarantee they could beat him.

"There has to be some other way! Something else we can do!" Oscar shouted.

"Honestly, there might be," Miledi replied calmly.

"Then—"

"But we don't have the time to look for it. This is the best we can do right now."

People were wrapped up in a growing wave of paranoia, and they were on the verge of killing each other. So, while Miledi and the others searched for the ideal solution, more and more innocent lives would be lost. That was why Miledi had gone and made the deal alone, even though she'd known it wasn't fair to Oscar and the others, and that they would be against it.

Of course, Miledi's decision meant that in the future, others would be forced to dance on Ehit's game board. In the end, she'd just delayed the problem. In fact, it was entirely possible even more people would be sacrificed in the future than would die now if Miledi and the others powered through to fight Ehit.

Ehit had been right when he'd called Miledi's choice foolish. But even so, it had been the only way.

"I can't sacrifice the people of the present for the sake of the future. But if we all die, then there won't be any hope left at all!" Miledi shouted, her voice raw with emotion. Everyone could tell that it was Miledi who hated having to make this choice most of all.

But even so, Oscar couldn't accept this outcome. In an equally emotional voice, he shouted, "Don't you get it?! It might be ages before someone strong enough to inherit all our ancient magic appears!"

It was hard to tell if he was trying to convince Miledi to change her mind or just railing against the harshness of reality.

“I know!”

“We might not get to see each other again before we die! We might all end up leaving you behind!”

“I know!”

“Once we’re gone, you won’t even have the comfort of knowing your comrades are fighting for the same cause as you! It might take hundreds, even thousands of years of solitude before—!”

“I don’t care even if it takes a million years!”

Miledi looked over Oscar, Meiru, Naiz, Vandre, Lyutillis, and Laus, her unwavering gaze piercing through all of them.

“I’ll wait for as long as it takes! Because I believe that people are strong! One day, someone’s going to appear who can finally save this world from that shitty god!”

Ehit had proposed these conditions because part of the entertainment for him was seeing whether or not Miledi broke under the weight of time. Miledi knew that, and she didn’t care. She’d been prepared from the start to endure. What really pained her was forcing her comrades to spend the rest of their lives in labyrinths as well. She had managed to negotiate enough that they’d be able to spend time with one other person at least, but she still felt bad about making this decision for them.

“Please, lend me your strength, everyone.”

However, these six were also the only people she felt comfortable making unreasonable demands of. They were the only people she could rely on, the only people she could entrust her back to. Until now, Miledi had been loath to rely on others, but she trusted Oscar and the others more than any of her other comrades. They were special.

A long silence followed her plea. Oscar and the others bit their lips in frustration, clenched their fists, and desperately tried to think of a way out of this dark predicament.

After a long time spent searching fruitlessly for another way, Oscar finally said, “I can’t do it, Miledi. I can’t bring myself to work toward confining you to a life of solitude.”

He turned his back to Miledi and walked away, blood dripping from his clenched fists.

“I need some time to think,” Meiru said as she staggered out of the grove, looking pale as a ghost.

In a quiet voice, Naiz said, “You and Oscar were the ones who dragged me out of a life of solitude.”

He gritted his teeth, leaving without saying anything more.

“.....” Vandre silently turned on his heel and walked off, his expression inscrutable.

“Miledi, you truly are strong...” Lyutillis mumbled in a sad voice,

trailing after Naiz.

“Sorry...” Laus said, lamenting his own powerlessness. After a few seconds, he left as well, leaving Miledi alone in the forest.

She looked up at the sky and closed her eyes. Instead of going after them and trying to convince them, she stayed behind. After all, the ultimate decision she’d made was to believe in people and wait.

Epilogue

A huge crowd of people was gathered in the theocracy's capital. Today was the day that Miledi Reisen, the greatest sinner in history and the heretical witch who'd led the greatest insurrection against the church in Tortus's history, would be executed.

"I just hope we don't get a repeat of what happened seven years ago..."

"Don't jinx it. The witch's six comrades are still at large. Who knows what they might try."

A group of two men looked worriedly around the rebuilt capital plaza. There was another execution platform that had been set up in the center, and like before, the leaders of the various nations were attending the execution.

The only difference from seven years ago was that it was dragonmen that were guarding the skies instead of the Paragons of Light, and the pope, the archbishops, and the respective commanders of the Three Pillars of Radiance were all different people.

"I heard the other six already died, though," another man said.

"Really? Well, it's not like anyone's seen them doing anything in a while, so maybe..."

"Even if they show up, we just have to band together again and we'll be able to take them!"

"Yeah. That rebellion from seven years ago was awful, but that surge of faith I felt welling up was amazing. I'd like to experience that feeling again someday."

"Yeah, it was so strong that we even fought alongside demons for a bit. Things looked dicey there after the rebels were taken care of, but the church managed to negotiate a truce and the demon empire's been quiet ever since."

The people in the crowd spoke fondly of their memories from seven years ago.

Suddenly, something shoved one of the men in the back. He turned around to see who it was and caught a brief glimpse of a hooded youth vanishing into the crowd. Clicking his tongue, the man put the youth out of his mind and looked back up at the execution platform. He couldn't wait for this seven-year-long war against the rebels to finally be over.

The youth that had bumped into him scowled, then slipped into a

side alley.

“Hey, I saw that. We’re not supposed to stand out, remember?” the hooded youth’s companion said as he stepped into the alley.

The hooded youth—who was none other than a 19-year-old Ruth—looked away bashfully. He had the grizzled features of a hardened craftsman, and he was taller than even Oscar now.

The other hooded youth was Dylan. He had bulging muscles now and carried himself like a true warrior. However, he also had a gentlemanly older-brother demeanor, which he’d clearly inherited from Oscar.

“Will you ever settle down, Ruth? You’re such an idiot,” Katy said with an exasperated shake of her head.

“Don’t treat me like I’m a dog!”

Katy was leaning against a nearby wall, and she too carried herself like a powerful warrior. Though she’d only just turned fifteen, she was quite the muscular beauty.

“Come on, no fighting, you two. We’re trying to lay low, right?” Corrin said in a gentle voice.

“Oh, um, sorry...” Ruth and Katy said, immediately cowed. Corrin, too, was only just fifteen, but she had an extremely motherly aura about her. Moreover, her boobs had grown quite big, which was noticeable even through her baggy cloak.

Sharm—who’d grown into an extremely handsome man—held Corrin’s hand to pacify her and said, “It’s almost time, guys.”

The current generation’s hero looked sadly off into the distance as a series of bells began to toll. Ruth and the others’ expressions stiffened, and the emotions they’d been trying to distract themselves from with small talk rose to the surface.

The pure-white double doors north of the main street swung open to reveal a chained Miledi. Her appearance had changed quite a bit over these past seven years. Her waist-length hair had lost its golden luster and was quite wispy. Her limbs were red and sore at the point where the shackles were digging into them.

Still, the sky-blue eyes that peeked out from behind her bangs were as striking as always. She looked exactly like Belta had when she’d been trapped in the Reisen Manor’s prison.

The executioner yanked on Miledi’s chains, and she staggered forward. Then, after a moment of silence, the crowd started hurling insults at her.

“You witch!”

“Pay for your sins with death!”

“How dare you turn your back on Lord Ehit despite being blessed with his powers!”

They flung garbage, stones, and even shit at her.

“Those bastards,” Ruth said through gritted teeth.

“Ruth-kun,” Sharm mumbled as he placed a hand on Ruth’s shoulder.

Ruth glared at Sharm, but Sharm tightened his grip and the pain brought Ruth back to his senses.

“This is what Nii-san and the others decided to do to preserve our future,” Dylan said in a shaky voice.

Katy squeezed his hand, but she, too, was trembling with anger.

“We came here to see her last moments as a human. Don’t ruin them,” Corrin said in a resolute voice. She definitely had the strongest mental fortitude of the surviving children.

The crowd roared with approval as the executioner affixed Miledi to a cross on the platform. She was going to be burned at the stake, and there was a huge pile of firewood ready beneath the cross.

The priests summoned fireballs into their hands and the new pope, who’d been chosen solely because of his family line, stated, “Heretic Miledi Reisen. This is your last chance to repent. Renounce your sins, and in his infinite mercy, Lord Ehit shall grant you a painless death.”

Miledi looked up at the pope, and the crowd fell silent. They wanted to hear history’s greatest heretic beg for forgiveness.

“I’ll repent...” she said slowly. But then, she grinned and added, “Did you really think I’d say that? Hah, you guys are so stupid! There’s no way I’m ever gonna apologize to that piece of shit god! I’m not a liar, after all!”



She raised her head to look up at the sky and glared defiantly at Ehit. Everyone, including Sharm and the others, looked at her in surprise.

Before anyone could recover from their shock, Miledi added, "Oh, but there is one thing I need to apologize for. I'm sorry I couldn't kill Ehit."

The regret in her voice was genuine.

The crowd wasn't able to keep up with how quickly she went from joking to serious, and the only person with enough presence of mind to say anything was the new dragon king, Shival.

"I'm tired of listening to her prattle! Burn her!" she shouted from the spectator stands set up for the various world leaders, finally bringing the pope back to his senses.

The priests remembered what they were here to do as well, so they launched their fireballs at the pile of wood. In seconds, the fire was at her feet.

Even though she should have been screaming in pain, Miledi looked kindly at the crowd. It wasn't the kind of expression a witch who'd tried to destroy the world should have been making, so the crowd looked at her in confusion.

"Hey, everyone, is it really a sin for all races to join hands?" she said as her clothes started to burn. The flames were licking her body now.

"Is it so wrong...to open up to others? To laugh...with them?"

The fire was eating up all the nearby oxygen, making it difficult for Miledi to breathe. Her voice came out in faltering gasps as she continued, "Is it so wrong...to say you like...the things you like?"

She was so badly burned now that her face was unrecognizable. But until the very end, Miledi continued speaking to the crowd in an exceedingly gentle voice.

"There's no way...it could be wrong... We're not...Ehit's toys!"

There was so little of her left that it was hard to believe she was still able to talk. Even the members of the church were transfixed by the sight.

"May your futures be free," Miledi said as she finally succumbed to the flames. She'd been dazzling until the very end.

The crowd stared, dumbfounded, at the charred corpse of the world's most dangerous heretic.

Suddenly, Miledi's body was enveloped in sky-blue light. The light slowly rose above the cross and coalesced into a ball, then vanished into the sky.

"Did her soul...return to heaven?" a man muttered, looking up.

It had been such a fantastical moment that the crowd continued

looking up long after the execution had ended.

“Miledi really went out with a bang,” Ruth said with a sad smile, which Dylan and the others returned. They then walked through the confused crowd, looking as though a weight had lifted off their shoulders.

“I guess it’s finally time for us to say our goodbyes,” Sharm said, and Ruth nodded to him. They weren’t children anymore, and they each had their own journey to embark on.

“Dylan and Katy, you guys are going to Dastia, right?”

“Yep. It’s going to become a haven for all the people branded as heretics, so I want to go there and protect it.”

“Plus, our teachers, King Alfard and Rasul-san, are over there.”

The wave of madness seven years ago had affected people within the vampire kingdom as well, but Alfard was the kind of guy who prioritized the people he cared about over the needs of the country. He’d quelled any and all uprisings with overwhelming violence, which had prevented the kingdom from falling apart. However, it had been a close call, and he’d realized that he needed strong warriors with no ties to court politics to keep his loved ones safe in Dastia.

Fortunately, it was around that time that Rasul had shown up, together with the demons he’d managed to rescue from his empire and Batlam. Thus, there were now demon villages as well as human villages in Dastia, and Rasul was serving as Alfard’s adviser, as well as the captain of his royal guard. The two of them got along surprisingly well and were good friends.

“Look after Onii-chan for us, Ruth-onii-chan,” Katy said.

“You got it. Though really, he’s gonna be the one looking after me, I think.”

Oscar had chosen Ruth as the one person he could stay in contact with after entering his labyrinth. The details of their contract with Ehit meant that only those who actually cleared Oscar’s labyrinth could take any of the artifacts he made down there. But while Oscar couldn’t send back any of his creations with Ruth, he could still train his younger brother to make artifacts himself.

Laus, of course, had chosen Sharm as his one person. Normally, Sharm would be traveling around the world as a wandering hero, but he would be checking in with Laus periodically. Corrin had also decided to travel with Sharm, and there was a budding romance between the two of them.

“Sharm. If you ever make Corrin cry, your life is forfeit,” Katy said in a dangerous voice, and Sharm and Corrin both blushed.

“It would have been nice if Yunfa and Diene could have made it...” Dylan said sadly.

“It would have been hard on Yunfa, since she’s pregnant and all.”

Unsurprisingly, Naiz had chosen Yunfa as his one connection with the outside world. In a way, it was Yunfa who’d grown the most over the past seven years. It was as if she’d inherited Susha’s spirit, as well as her rather extreme attempts at seduction.

As soon as she’d become of age, Naiz had finally given in and agreed to marry her.

“Plus, Diene’s in Andika, so it would have been a long journey for her.”

“I hear she’s taken over Baharl’s position as the city’s don, so she’s probably pretty busy too.”

The conversation naturally died out, but everyone was still reluctant to part.

The crowd had finally recovered from their stupor as well. They were chattering excitedly to each other, completely ignoring the priests who were giving some speech about how the death of the witch proved Ehit’s righteousness.

Sharm smiled a little as he listened in on the conversations, then held his fist out to Ruth and the others.

“Let’s survive and meet again.”

They had made it this far thanks to the sacrifices of others, so it was their duty to keep living and ensure those sacrifices hadn’t been in vain. Ruth and the others smiled and bumped Sharm’s fist with their own.

After a few seconds, they turned around and began walking down their respective paths. They would make sure the truth about the Liberators got passed down, one way or another.

Standing on the plains next to where the old hidden village in the Reisen Gorge had been was a circle of seven people. Or rather, a circle of six people and one golem that was currently being bathed in sky-blue light.

“Miledi-chan’s baaaaaaaaaaaaack!” the golem with a smiley-face mask exclaimed and struck a cutesy pose.

This golem had been created with the combined efforts of all seven ancient magic users, and it was Miledi’s new body.

Seven years ago, Miledi’s faith had been rewarded when Oscar and the others had returned. They had been extremely conflicted at first, but after spending time talking with their loved ones, they’d ultimately decided to go along with Miledi’s plan.

They’d spent the past seven years together, cherishing every moment as they worked together to create the labyrinths. However, today was the last day they’d ever see each other.

“My, Miledi-chan! I can’t believe you continue to refer to yourself

in the third person even after passing twenty. That's the most cringe thing I've ever seen!"

"Shut up, Meru-nee! I don't wanna hear that from a thirty-year-old who—"

"Excuse me?" Meiru said with an extremely threatening smile, and Miledi looked away awkwardly.

"This isn't the time to be fooling around, guys," Naiz said in an exasperated voice, massaging his temples.

"Hey, you don't have any right to talk, Nacchan. You're the one who got a super young wife in your midthirties."

"Not only that, but he's been totally henpecked. Isn't that right, Naiz-kun?"

"Please don't remind me," Naiz replied as he squatted down and cradled his head. It seemed he really couldn't win against his young wife in anything.

"Cut it out. Every time I hear about people's married lives...I get depressed."

"Sorry, Lau-chan, I guess that's still a traumatic event for you. Anyway, I'm impressed your hair still hasn't grown back."

"That's because I shave it regularly! I'm not bald!"

Ignoring Laus's protests, Miledi turned nostalgically to Vandre and said, "Van-chan...your taste in mufflers has gotten awful."

"It's not my fault. Margaretta keeps making them for me."

Vandre was currently wearing a pink muffler dotted with red hearts. It was obvious who he'd chosen as his one person to stay in contact with.

The Schnee clan had also reclaimed the old village they'd used to inhabit on the border of the Obsidian Tundra. A lot of the dragonmen who'd respected the Schnee family had moved there as well.

"Hey, Lyu-chan. Are you absolutely sure you still want to go through with that cockroach trial? It's not too late to change it, you know?" Miledi asked, turning to Lyutillis.

"Nothing you say will change my mind! I'm about to go back to a life of loneliness, so at least let me have my forest friends!"

"You won't be completely alone. You've got Kia-chan still, remember?"

"She's got an inn to run, so she can't be with me all the time. Plus, it's not even in the Pale Forest! One of these days, she's definitely going to say something like, 'Sorry, I'm busy. It'll be a while before I can come again,' and then I'll be left all alone forever!" Lyutillis wailed. Sadly, the moment she'd decided to go make her trial a barrage of millions of cockroaches, her comrades had basically given up all hope of reforming her.

It was honestly amazing that Kiara had willingly offered to be

Lyutillis's one conduit to the outside world after learning what she was like. Rabbitmen truly were the strongest of all races.

Ignoring Lyutillis's crying, Miledi took a picture out of her pocket and looked at it nostalgically. It was a group picture of all seven of them standing on a hill overlooking the promontory where Belta's grave was. They'd taken it just before they'd started making their respective labyrinths.

Oscar had suggested they all have pictures of each other to help remember each other, and this was just one of the many, many that he'd taken. This, over everything else, was Miledi's most prized possession.

"He he, O-chan. Thanks for giving me this."

In the end, Miledi hadn't been able to return to calling Oscar O-kun. It was proof that she'd well and truly given up on living a normal life.

"That's the picture from seven years ago, isn't it? You already thanked me for it a bunch of times back then."

"Well, I'll keep thanking you! This is the best picture ever! Plus, it shows me when I was at my prettiest!"

"That reminds me, why did your spirit form have the appearance of you from seven years ago?"

"Don't worry about it!"

Oscar gazed sadly down at Miledi, and she purposely chose not to comment on his expression. Instead, she smiled even more cheerfully back up at him.

Suddenly, the seven of them sensed a familiar presence in the distance.

"It's time..." Miledi said, looking over at the apostle sent to monitor them.

Behind each of the Liberators was a magic circle. Once they stepped into them, they'd be teleported to their labyrinths and the teleporters would be destroyed. This was their final farewell.

"All right, everyone, I guess this is goodbye! Don't get so lonely you leave your labyrinths to come see me, okay?"

It was precisely because they would never see each other again that Miledi was determined to remain cheerful and smiling to the very end. All of the things she wanted to say, she already had over the past seven years.

Oscar and the others stared at her, burning her appearance into their memories. Miledi could feel the love in all of their gazes.

The first one to turn around was Naiz. He stopped just before he reached the teleporter, though, and looked back over his shoulder at Miledi and said, "It was an honor to travel with you. Thank you, Miledi."

“Nacchan...if anything, I’m the one who should be thanking you. Thanks for fighting by my side.”

Naiz gave Miledi one last smile, then disappeared through his teleporter.

The next one to go was Lyutillis, who said, “Miledi, you showed me a dream, and for that, I am eternally grateful. I will continue to believe that the day will come when that dream is fulfilled.”

“Yeah, I won’t stop believing either. Goodbye, Lyu-chan.”

The queen of the forest’s smile was as firm and unshakable as the sacred tree. She stepped into her teleportation circle and disappeared in a bright green flash. The circle then dulled, its duty completed.

After her, the next to go was Laus.

“Belta made the right choice in picking you,” Laus said in a voice full of conviction.

“Lau-chan...”

“That’s all I wanted to say. Be proud of yourself, Miledi Reisen.”

The world’s strongest knight’s expression was so gentle it hurt.

Once Laus was gone, Vandre started walking toward his circle. Just before he left, however, he glanced over to where Oscar was. He then turned to Miledi, and with a deep sigh walked back over to her.

“Huh?” Miledi muttered, confused. Vandre squatted down and flicked her on the forehead.

“Owww! Hey, what was that for?!”

“That’s what you get for being stubborn,” Vandre stated. He then turned on his heel as if nothing had happened, and as he walked away, he said, “You’re more charming when you’re being annoying. Never forget that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

Miledi couldn’t believe that this was how they were going to part, but Vandre just laughed and vanished into his teleportation circle.

“Heh, it’s just like Van-kun to leave like that. Now then, Miledi-chan.”

“What is it, Meru-nee?”

“You may have grown over these past seven years, but your boobs never got any bigger.”

“Who cares about my bust size?!”

Don’t tell me you’re just gonna leave like this too, Meru-nee! Miledi thought, but then Meiru suddenly hugged her.

“I’m so glad I met you. I wanted to spend so much more time with you.”

“Me too, Meru-nee.”

The two of them embraced for a while, but then Meiru finally got up.

“Remember, you’re not alone. Even if I die before you, I’ll be

thinking about you for all eternity.”

“He he he, I know.”

They smiled at each other. Of course, in Miledi’s case, the smile was permanently plastered onto her mask, but Meiru knew she was smiling inside. Meiru kept her gaze fixed on Miledi even as she walked back to the teleporter, smiling up until the moment she vanished. It was almost as if the two of them really were sisters, seeing how lovingly they looked at each other.

“I guess the others wanted to let us have our moment alone,” Oscar said with an awkward smile.

“O-chan...I’m sorry for being so selfish.”

Oscar shook his head, and for once, it was Miledi who turned her back first. She headed straight toward her magic circle.

“You have no idea how grateful I am to you, O-chan. If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t have made it this far. You were the one who supported me the most through everything.”

Miledi knew she was turning her back on the promise she’d made with him, so she wanted to at least convey what she genuinely felt.

She stopped one step away from her circle, sensing Oscar’s gaze on her back. But then, Oscar also turned around and began walking to his magic circle.

I wonder if he finally got fed up with me? I wanted to at least see him off with a smile, but I guess I messed up again... Miledi thought as she stroked her mask with a metallic finger.

“Even if an eternity passes...” Oscar said suddenly.

“Huh?”

“Even if we’re both reduced to nothing but souls...”

“.....”

“I swear I’ll come for you.”

For the first time, Miledi was glad she had a golem body...because it meant Oscar wouldn’t hear her gasp.

“These past seven years, I kept looking for a way to keep you from being alone forever. I even scoured through fairy tales. But in the end, I couldn’t find anything. Though, I did read a bunch of stories about people being reunited even after hopping between worlds or being reborn.”

One fairy tale had already proven to be based on real magic, so Oscar Orcus chose to believe that the others he’d found were as well.

“Next time, I’ll be the one to find you. It doesn’t matter whether you’re at the far end of the world or even the very depths of hell, I swear I’ll find you.”

Miledi wanted to turn back and reach out to Oscar. But if she did that, she’d return to being a normal girl, and a normal girl wouldn’t be able to endure the long journey she was about to embark on. And so,

she didn't turn around.

Besides, she knew that Oscar Orcus, more than anyone else, would understand and respect her decision...and her feelings.

"I don't plan on throwing away the happiness I found by meeting you, so I'm not going to say farewell."

"O...chan..."

"That's right. I'm O-chan."

Even now, he approved of and supported Miledi's decision to remain the Liberators' leader above all else. It was thanks to Oscar that Miledi felt like she'd be able to pull through.

"See you later, Miledi. One way or another, we'll meet again."

"Yeah, see you later, O-chan!"

And thus, the two of them parted ways, holding their feelings—their greatest treasures—close to their hearts. They stepped into their magic circles with their backs straight and tears streaming down their smiling faces.

Neither of them turned back even once.

With the defeat of the so-called mavericks, the world returned to a modicum of peace. Ten years passed, then a hundred. Memories of that age of turmoil began to fade, and a new rumor began to spread.

Supposedly, there were seven labyrinths scattered across the world, and an amazing reward would be granted to anyone who could clear them.

Rumor had it that those seven labyrinths had been created by the mavericks of ages past, and eventually, those labyrinths came to be named after their creators. Yet more time passed and the labyrinths themselves were forgotten, but strangely enough, the Liberators' names continued to live on in the memories of the people.

It was almost as if there were people constantly passing down the tale to ensure the Liberators would never be forgotten, so that their desire for freedom would burn as bright as ever.



Afterword

Thank you so much for picking up *Arifureta Zero* volume 6!

Hello, everyone, Ryo Shirakome here. At long last, the *Arifureta* spin-off series is done. I get kind of emotional thinking about how Miledi's story is over now.

How did you guys like it? Did you enjoy the story about the Liberators and how it connects to *Arifureta* present? Writing it all was pretty tough, but I can definitively say that I enjoyed it all the way through.

There was so much I wanted to include, which was why this volume ended up over five hundred pages long. Even that wasn't enough though, and a lot of the things I couldn't fit into the book, I've written in the short stories. If there are any characters you're wondering about, or if you want to know more about how the labyrinths got built, make sure to check them out. They might have what you're looking for. Though honestly, I probably shouldn't be running marketing for the bookstores in my afterword (shifty look).

Anyway, it's all thanks to you guys that I was able to write the *Arifureta Zero* series all the way to the end. Oh, and thanks to my editor too, who almost passed out when I told him the page count for this volume, of course.

The main series is reaching its climax as well, and we're about to see how Miledi and the Liberators' stories connect to Hajime's story, as well as the conclusion of Miledi's lone journey. I hope you guys enjoy seeing what she does during the finale of the main story.

I've actually written a little short story after this afterword about how Miledi feels in the present day, so you should check that out as well.

Season two of the anime is starting next year. It's going to cover a lot more of the labyrinths, so it might be interesting to watch while thinking about the Liberators that made them. It's also going to get into the first big fight against an apostle, so I hope you all enjoy that.

I'm running out of page space now, so it's time for the acknowledgments.

As always, a huge thank you to Takayaki-sensei for the illustrations and to Ataru Kamichi-sensei for drawing the *Arifureta Zero* manga. I'd also like to thank RoGa-sensei for drawing the main series manga, and Misaki Mori-sensei for working on the *Arifureta: I*

Love Isekai manga. Thanks as well to my editor, proofreader, and everyone else who made the publication of this book possible.

I'd also like to thank the Narou denizens who've been following along with the *Arifureta* extended universe, and of course, you readers for sticking with this to the very end even though it's just a spin-off series.

Thank you all so, so much.

The *Arifureta Zero* series ends here, but *Arifureta* itself isn't over, so I hope to see you all again in a future volume.

Shirakome Ryo

In the Distant Future

“We’re going to beat the shit out of god! Come help us!”

Miledi thought back to what that violent bunny girl had said when she’d returned to the labyrinth.

Does that girl have any idea how long I’ve waited to hear that, or how happy that made me? she thought as she looked down at her treasured picture one last time. One way or another, tomorrow would be the end of her long, long journey.

“I wonder where your soul goes when you die? Man, that’s totally out of character for me to say.”

Chuckling, Miledi flicked the forehead of the man she was hugging in the picture. There was no turning back now. No, there hadn’t been for a long time.

She left her room and headed to the hall where the final trial was held. She then passed through rows upon rows of golem knights and sat upon the shoulder of the large golem at their head, the golem knight king.

A massive magic circle appeared in the ceiling. It was a teleportation circle leading to the outside world that she could use only once. The circle began to glow, its light filling the room.

Miledi felt a burning excitement welling up within her, but at the same time, she felt calm and collected. She was at once mentally psyching herself up for the fierce battle ahead and reminiscing about all the fun times she’d had in the past.

It felt like Oscar, Naiz, Meiru, Vandre, Lyutillis, Laus, and all of her other comrades were right there behind her.

She placed a hand on her mask and felt the glow of her soul leaking out from behind it.

“All right, everyone.”

A beautiful girl with blonde hair and sky-blue eyes grinned fearlessly up at the ceiling. After thousands of years, the Liberator Miledi Reisen was heading out to the battlefield, carrying millions of memories with her.

“Let’s do this.”





"EHIT, I'VE
COME TO
BARGAIN."

"I DOUBT
YOUR
COMPANIONS
WILL APPROVE
OF THIS."

Bonus Short Stories

You Did Good, Kid

Six years had passed since the Liberators had begun making their labyrinths. The group was now working on the final one, Miledi's, which would be located in the Reisen Gorge. Right now, though, Miledi and Oscar had headed out into the world to put a certain plan into motion.

"Man, what a riot! They're calling this the cursed land that gave birth to the cute witch Miledi!" Miledi said, cackling as she skipped ahead of Oscar. The Reisen Gorge had been declared a cursed land over the past few years, so almost no one came to it anymore.

"They're calling you the heretical witch, not the cute witch."

"I know, but cute sounds better."

"You realize you're not a teenager anymore, right?"

"You wanna fight, O-chan?" Miledi asked as she twirled around to face Oscar. She looked quite different from six years ago. For one thing, she'd swapped out her miniskirt for a longer one. She'd also let her hair down instead of keeping it in pigtails. She'd gotten a good fifteen centimeters taller, and her baby face looked much more mature. But while her appearance had changed significantly, her personality had remained the exact same.

"Uhhh, well, all right. If you wanna call yourself cute, you can."

"Hey, Oscar, why aren't you looking me in the eyes?"

Incidentally, the one part of Miledi that hadn't grown was her boobs.

"Anyway, we're here, Miledi. Your old manor was around there, right?"

Miledi glared at Oscar, but then with a click of her tongue, she turned back around to look at her old home. Nothing was left of it. With Reisen having become a cursed name, there was no one living in this region anymore. That was convenient for Oscar and Miledi, but still, it felt a bit sad to be looking at an empty lot. Relying on her memories, Miledi walked over to where the mansion had once stood.

"Miledi?"

"Give me a second to mentally prepare myself," Miledi said, then took a deep breath.

The two of them had come here to take a picture. At Oscar's suggestion, they'd started a picture album and taken a bunch of group

and solo pictures over the past six years. And this picture would be one of the most important additions to that album. In a way, this would be a reunion for Miledi.

“I’m ready, O-chan.”

“Got it.”

Oscar put a small, palm-sized jewel in the center of the manor’s ruins. A second later, a golden glow enveloped the area. Oscar took out the jewel’s pair and held it in his hand. It was an artifact that allowed the user to recreate a vision of the past and project it anywhere. Expending a huge amount of mana, Oscar used his artifact to bring back a vision from eleven years ago. People moved backward in hyper speed while buildings were built and taken down in seconds as Oscar swam back through time. And eventually—

“Ah...”

The girl Miledi had been waiting for appeared. Belta Lievre. Her annoying smile was exactly as Miledi remembered it. Miledi unconsciously used gravity magic to float up into the air. Oscar followed after her, coming to a stop a short distance behind her. He watched quietly as the image of Belta stuck something into Miledi’s bed. Her expression was bright, and she was clearly excited for Miledi to find whatever she’d stashed.

“So that’s the kind of face you made when you were setting up your pranks, huh?” Miledi mumbled. Her voice was trembling. She was smiling, but tears of longing were spilling down her cheeks. After some time passed, young Miledi walked into the room. Belta excused herself rather quickly, which was unusual, considering she normally messed around with Miledi up until bedtime, and Miledi’s shoulders drooped a little as Belta left.

“I can’t believe Belle doesn’t want to talk today...” young Miledi and present Miledi both said at the same time. Young Miledi then changed into her pajamas and pulled back the covers of her bed, only to find a giant porn poster underneath. For five minutes, young Miledi just stared at it in abject shock. Finally, she regained her senses and prepared to burn it, but as she looked at it, she became captivated and couldn’t stop staring. Meanwhile, Belta watched through a crack in the doorway. And eventually, Miledi noticed she was being watched and shouted at Belta. After being chased around for a bit, Belta jumped onto Miledi’s bed, and Miledi dived after her. The two of them slapped each other for a few seconds, then rolled onto the ground in a tangled heap.

“It looks like you were having a lot of fun,” Oscar said quietly.

“I was...”

Oscar played the vision forward again, and the two of them watched as slowly but surely Miledi learned to let her emotions show

thanks to Belta. Despite being constantly teased, Miledi looked like she was genuinely enjoying her time. Every now and then, Belta taught her some important life lessons, but their interactions always ended with them messing around. They spent less than a year together in total, but by the end, they were as close as siblings. Oscar made sure to record all of these tender moments in his portable Skynet.

“Just once, I asked old man Sal,” Miledi suddenly said, “...I asked him why Belle had come to the manor. She was the leader of the Liberators back then, and she wasn’t even all that strong, so why had she personally infiltrated the Reisen family’s manor?”

“You...make a good point.”

Now that Miledi had pointed out that fact, Oscar realized how strange that was.

“Apparently, Sal and the others had all been against Belle’s decision.”

“I take it she was too stubborn to change her mind?”

“Yep. Apparently, she’d told Sal that even though she’d lost her special magic that let her read the lines of fate when she’d died the first time, she could *feel* that she’d find the hope they were looking for at the Reisen Gorge.”

Miledi looked down at Belta, who was currently stroking the hair of a sleeping young Miledi. Then, speaking more to herself than to Oscar, she muttered, “Thinking back on it now, she must have sacrificed her life to transform me from the executioner family’s puppet into a Liberator.”

“Are you wondering whether you’ve done enough to make her sacrifice worth it?”

Still looking down at Belta, Miledi nodded slightly. Oscar gave her an exasperated look, walked over to her, and declared, “You’re an idiot, you know that?!”

“Wh-What?!” Miledi roared, turning around indignantly. But then, her eyes widened in surprise when she saw the camera in Oscar’s hands.

“Come on, get down there. Hurry up. I’m running out of mana here.”

“W-Wait, you’re gonna take the picture now?! Hold on! I wanna pick the right scene to—”

“Shut up. You’ve got a terrible sense for photos anyway. Scoot a little to the right. Put your hands on your hips and lean a bit to the left! Yeah, just like that! Now give me that annoying smile you always make!”

Overwhelmed, Miledi obediently did as Oscar asked. He nodded in satisfaction, and as soon as the picture was taken, she scowled and ran over to him. Instead of saying anything, he just showed her the picture

he'd taken.

"Ah..." Miledi gasped. In the picture, her smile was identical to Belta's and the two of them were making the exact same pose.

"Yep, you're definitely prettier— Ahem, I mean your smile's more annoying. You've completely surpassed your master."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

"It's the job of a disciple to surpass their master. That's the best way to show you love them. It's what my dad told me, so it's gotta be true." Oscar looked Miledi straight in the eyes. "Besides, you've done so much for us—and for the world—and you're going to keep on striving for the ideal future until the end of time. There isn't a single person alive who would dare say Belta's sacrifice wasn't worth it."

Oscar didn't want to speak for the dead, so he made sure not to say that Belta would have told Miledi it was worth it. But as someone who'd walked down the same path as Miledi, he wanted to let her know how he felt.

"I see..." Miledi turned her back to Oscar. "All right, let's go back! I can't wait to see that picture get developed!" she said cheerfully. She then smiled one last time at Belta and turned on her heel.

Oscar erased the vision of the past and quietly followed her. He could tell she was blushing, but he had enough tact not to point that out.

Kaori's Sexy Yue Observation Diary

This is a story about Hajime and the crew shortly after he reunited with Kaori in the Great Orcus Labyrinth and she joined the party.

"Whyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy?!" Kaori screamed as she dropped to all fours and pounded the ground. Today, like most days, she had been forced to watch Hajime and Yue flirt endlessly without any opportunity to wedge herself between them. Every time she tried to force herself into the mix, Yue would just blow her away with magic and then belittle her to add insult to injury. Kaori hadn't managed to get the better of Yue even once yet.

"Ch-Cheer up, Kaori-san. I know how you feel, but it'll get better," Shea said, patting Kaori's shoulder.

"Yue is surprisingly stubborn when it comes to Kaori specifically," Tio mused.

"Right?!" Kaori exclaimed, looking up at her. "Do you see how she grins at me every single time?! And how she always brags about how she and Hajime-kun and Myu-chan are all sleeping together in the same room?! I wish I could do that! She always looks over at me when she's holding hands with Hajime-kun too! God, I just wish I could break them apart somehow!"

“Your thoughts are growing darker and darker,” Shea said with a sad smile.

“It’s the middle of the night, Kaori. Keep it down or we’ll get complaints,” Tio said.

“I understand now. I was a fool,” Kaori said, visibly deflated, all of the tension draining from her body.

She clearly wasn’t listening to a word Shea or Tio said. Shea gave Tio a worried glance, and Tio nodded. Kaori was beginning to grow unstable.

“If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. I know too little about my rival in love. I need to gather intel on Yue and find her weakness! I need to observe her! All the time! ALL THE TIME!” Kaori turned to Shea and Tio, who both shrunk back in fear. There was an outright ghastly look in her eyes. “And I have two sources of intel right here. Hey, Shea, Tio, tell me all about Yue.”

Scared for their lives, they both nodded.

Over the course of the next few days, Kaori spent her every waking moment watching Yue. When everyone sat down in the inn’s common room for breakfast, Kaori realized how elegant and refined each and every one of Yue’s movements was as she ate. She glared at Yue, who was so surprised by the animosity in Kaori’s gaze that her hands slipped for a second and she got some jam on her cheek. As Kaori saw that, there was only one thought that ran through her mind:

That’s so sexy!

Yue glared back at Kaori while alluringly licking the jam with her tongue. At the same time, she used her finger to wipe the sauce staining Myu’s mouth and licked that as well. Even when she wasn’t trying to be seductive, all of her mannerisms exuded sex appeal. Yue somehow managed to make the act of eating breakfast into something naughty. Kaori knew she wasn’t just imagining it either, since all of the young men sitting nearby were staring at Yue too. Though, of course, Hajime glared at them until they turned pale and went back to minding their own business.

The same thing happened when they went shopping for supplies before heading out.

She’s way too sexy!

They’d stopped at a clothing store to replace their worn travel clothes, and Yue was currently trying on an overcoat. However, because of how short she was, the coat went all the way to her thighs, creating the illusion that she wasn’t wearing anything underneath, which paired exceedingly well with her knee socks. When she bent down to adjust her shoes, it was unbelievably sexy. It felt like you could almost see up her skirt from behind, but it still hid just enough.

As always, Hajime glared at the other guests who were staring at Yue, causing them to scurry away in fear.

Observing Yue at night was the hardest part, though. In fact, it was quite the ordeal for Kaori. Hajime and Yue were both fans of baths, so they always picked inns that had them. As a result, Kaori and Yue often ended up taking baths together, and even washing each other's backs.

"Mmm... Kaori... Ah, that's too rough. Can't you be, mmm, gentler?"

"Are you doing this on purpose?! You totally are! What do you want from me?!"

"Hm? I just want you to be gentler so it doesn't hurt."

"Bwagh!"

In truth, Kaori had been rubbing a little too hard, and Yue had simply voiced a request. However, the way Yue moaned every time Kaori did anything was just too erotic. Kaori wasn't even into girls, yet she felt like she might end up falling for Yue anyway. She was beginning to wonder if Yue didn't have some kind of sex-related special magic.

What in the world is this sexy-cute creature?! Is this how she won Hajime-kun over?! I guess I can't blame him! Her sexiness is a weapon of mass destruction! Hold it together, Kaori. Don't forget that Yue's your rival! You have to beat her!!! Shizuku-chan, please watch over me!

Kaori's thoughts were a complete mess, but she managed to make it through her bath time naked with Yue. Though Kaori had started this project to try to find Yue's weakness, her goal had completely shifted by now.

"You've been looking at me with lustful eyes recently, Kaori. Are you a pervert?"

"Excuse me! This is your fault for being a walking bundle of sex appeal!"

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

Yue narrowed her eyes at Kaori, preparing to teach her a lesson like usual. But for once, the heavens favored Kaori.

"You're sexy. And you flaunt it. Everyone can tell."

"H-Hajime?!"

Indeed, it was Hajime, who had been impassively watching their spat, who'd said that.

"If our Status Plates had a stat for sex appeal, yours would be over 9,000."

"Why that oddly specific number?!"

Yue gave Hajime a shocked look, but there was no one willing to take her side on this one.

"I know what you mean. She's so casual about it that it's hard to

notice, but I suppose nothing escapes your sharp eyes, Kaori-san. Well done,” Shea said, looking at Kaori like a master proud of her disciple.

“You too, Shea?! Does this mean you thought I was a naughty girl this whole time?!”

Even the resident pervert dragon thought Yue was too seductive.

“Yue. Were you under the impression that you weren’t the living incarnation of lust?” Tio asked.

“What...?”

Yue started trembling, and she turned to Myu, ever the innocent angel, for support. But when Myu met her gaze, she just blushed a little and looked away. Yue’s hands balled up into fists and her cheeks started twitching. It was hard to tell if she was embarrassed or indignant.

“Listen, there’s been a misunderstanding. I am not that immodest a woman! I know how to restrain myself!”

“Yes, yes, of course. I’m sure you truly believe that,” Kaori said in a voice laden with pity.

“Okay, that’s the last straw. Tonight is the night you die, Kaori!”

Now Yue was definitely indignant. She started her usual catfight with Kaori while Hajime and the others watched on with smiles on their faces.

A Certain Princess’s Ancestor

A spirited yell echoed throughout an enclosed circular arena.

“Haaaaaaaah!”

The arena’s walls were made of metal, and there wasn’t a single window. The only source of illumination was the glowing sword that clashed with a war mace clad in a jet-black aura. Shock waves rippled out from the arena every single time the two weapons struck, and they did so with such speed that the weapons looked like shooting stars. This was undoubtedly one of the most legendary battles of the era. One of the combatants was a man in his thirties with slicked-back gray hair. The other was a bald man well into old age. The two of them locked weapons once more, their faces inches apart. They then jumped back at the same time and raised their hands into the air, light coalescing around them.

“Divine Wrath.”

“Divine Wrath.”

Both of them fired off the strongest offensive light-magic spell simultaneously. Had there been any spectators in the arena, they would have all gasped. But as it was, the only sound was that of the air creaking as the magic attacks collided, sending both parties flying.

“Nnnnnngh, grant me your strength, Holy Sword!”

Even as he was being blown away, the younger man called out the Holy Sword, which answered its master's will and extended at unbelievable speed to thrust at his enemy. He was easily strong enough to be considered the world's greatest knight—but only among those still living on the surface. His opponent was still clearly one step above him.

“Heh, that was just an afterimage.”

The bald man's figure blurred, and the Holy Sword's tip passed harmlessly through his illusion. Meanwhile, his mace hit the younger man squarely in the solar plexus.

“Gah!” The younger man cried out as he was slammed into the wall. His Limit Break wore off, and the light of his mana dimmed. He then crumpled to the ground and groaned softly. “I still didn't manage to beat you even at the very end...”

“True, but that was a splendid display, Sharm.”

Indeed, the two combatants were Sharm and Laus. They were in the depths of the labyrinth in the Divine Mountain. Normally, this would be where any challengers to the labyrinth would face their final trial, but as Sharm was the one person Laus had chosen to keep in contact with, he could come and go as he pleased without clearing the trials.

Sharm had spent the last twenty years roaming Tortus as a wandering Hero, but he'd made sure to come back once every year to visit Laus and train under him.

Laus sat down next to his son, his expression so gentle that it was hard to believe he'd been fighting so fiercely mere seconds ago. Sharm was once again reminded of just how difficult a task it would be to surpass his father, and he covered his eyes with his arm.

“It's been twenty years since you guys disappeared from the world, father.”

Laus simply listened quietly, so Sharm kept going.

“...Yunfa's had yet another kid, you know? Her and Naiz's family has gotten huge, and it looks like she's still planning on having more. Oh yeah, Dylan's son's gotten old enough to join the mercenary group he started. Diene wanted him to take over Andika for her, but he's determined to be a mercenary like his dad.”

Sharm's voice trembled a little as he spoke.

“Oh yeah, Diene's pregnant with her third child now. Her daughter gave her a lot of trouble when she was growing up because she always brought home strange creatures and stuff, but now she's all grown up herself. Heh heh, Dylan and Diene sure didn't waste any time, though. I can't believe they made a third kid the moment their second became an adult. Oh yeah, Katy's probably going to end up giving in and marrying Albanor-kun soon. She kept on using the

differences in their age and status as excuses, but Albanor-kun's as persistent as his dad. Katy seems to like him well enough too."

Sharm sat up and rested his sword on his knees. As he looked down at it, he continued, "Ruth's workshop has become the best in the country. He's gotten the king's permission to inherit Karg-san's family name too. Oh yeah, and Kiara's son handed the inn off to his sister and went to the Pale Forest. Apparently, his dream is to create a clan of rabbitmen that are stronger than anyone else. Kiara was complaining to me about how telling him all those stories about Sui was a mistake. Shirley's made quite a name for herself too. She's the leader of the Entris branch of the adventurer's guild. She's been constantly on the lookout for adventurers strong enough to challenge the labyrinths."

As he said that, all of Sharm's energy leaked out and he leaned back despondently. He squeezed the hilt of his Holy Sword, struggling to find the right words.

"What's my grandson's name?" Laus asked, and Sharm looked up at him in shock. "Did you really think I wouldn't notice?"

Laus knew his son all too well.

"Congratulations, Sharm. You're a father now too."

"But I..." Sharm trailed off in a pained voice, prompting Laus to bop him on the head.

"Fool. Did you learn nothing from watching me?"

Laus had spent his whole life telling himself that things had to be this way, that he had no other choice, and because of that, he'd failed to be a good father to his sons. By the time he'd finally mustered the resolve to change that, it had been too late. Thus, he didn't want his last surviving son to go down the same path he had.

"Just because you're the Hero, just because you're my son, it doesn't mean you need to devote your whole life to succeeding my legacy."

"Father...I really can't keep anything from you, can I?"

Sharm smiled sadly. Laus really had seen right through him. Sharm had spent the past twenty years trying to clear the labyrinths, but he'd only managed to conquer one of them. And to make matters worse, his aptitude for the ancient magic he'd acquired was abysmal. He hadn't even met the prerequisites to challenge his father's labyrinth, which was conquering two other labyrinths first. Of course, he hadn't devoted his full time to the labyrinths, since he'd also gone around helping people as the Hero, but the fact remained that he hadn't accomplished as much as he'd wanted.

"If you had kept Corrin waiting any longer, I would have smacked you."

"You just did, didn't you?"

“Well, it’s thanks to that that you were finally able to work up the resolve to tell me, right?”

Sharm had spent the past twenty years trying to become the successor to the Liberators’ will and slay Ehit in their place, but Laus knew it was time he put it behind him and made a new life for himself.

“Just so you know, being a good father is much harder than clearing all the labyrinths. You better prepare yourself,” Laus said with a grin.

Sharm smiled wanly back and replied, “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You better. I mean, it’s the last thing I’ll be able to teach you.”

Sharm bit his lip and looked over at Laus. His father was beginning to glow faintly, and his figure was starting to turn transparent. In truth, Laus had died a while back. However, he’d separated his spirit from his corpse and used the spirit magic Soul Shadow to bind it to a clone of himself made of mana. Once the mana maintaining the body ran out, his spirit would vanish and he would die for real. Their earlier battle had been the last training session he would ever do with Sharm, and this was the last conversation they would ever have.

“Father, no... It’s too soon...”

“It’s fine. With how hard I pushed this old body, I’m surprised I even made it to sixty.”

Laus smiled happily. He’d lived long enough to hear that his son had finally been blessed with a child, so there wasn’t anything more he could ask for.

“Raise your head, Sharm. Even if I hadn’t prodded you, you came here to tell me about my grandchild and your decision to focus on raising them, right?”

Again, Laus had seen right through Sharm. It was only now that Sharm realized Laus had stuck around so long after his physical body had died precisely because he’d been waiting for this day. This final training session had been Laus’s way of encouraging Sharm to be proud of his decision.

Sharm looked up, determined to at least keep his head held high during his father’s final moments.

“Father, I have something to tell you.”

“Mhm.”

“A few days ago, I became a father...and I’m thinking of spending the rest of my life with my wife and child.”

Laus had almost completely faded now.

“Until now, I’ve lived as just Sharm and kept my family name hidden, but I’m thinking of doing as the Levellair family did and adopting a new family name to serve as a cover for my true one.”

“I see. Have you decided on what to choose, Sharm?”

“No. I was hoping you would grant me one, father, as well as choose the name of our daughter.”

“Are you sure you want me to do it?”

“Absolutely. This is Corrin’s wish as well.”

With a very grandfatherly smile, Laus said, “In that case...”

Laus thought for a moment. He knew he wanted to include the name of the previous Hero, the loyal knight who had faithfully served the Barn family and fought to protect those he loved. In fact, the name Reinheit meant ‘to save another,’ which felt rather poetic. He also wanted to express the name Sharm Barn in there somehow, to remind people of this generation’s Hero, and the last head of the Barn family. Finally, he wanted a reminder of the very first Liberator—Belta.

Thus, he settled on the name Belle S. B. Heiligh. Little did he know that his distant descendant would then go on to accomplish great things.

The Vampire King and the Ultimate Synergist

Oscar dropped to one knee, his glasses glimmering in the dim light as he concentrated on the ground in front of him. Right now, he was in one of the underground rooms in Dastia’s palace.

“You should stop making that expression. You look like you’re planning something nefarious,” a voice called out to him from behind, and Oscar whirled around in surprise.

“King Alfard! Don’t scare me like that!”

Alfard grinned at him, and Oscar turned off his glasses’ glow.

“Like I said before, you can just call me Al when we’re not in public,” he said as he held up a basket giving off a delicious scent and a small water bottle.

“You’ve been at it all day. Why not take a little break?”

“Oh, thanks.”

Oscar dropped all pretenses of acting formal and gratefully accepted the basket from Alfard. The two of them then sat on the ground across from each other and started eating.

“Be grateful, Selene made this herself. Each one of these is worth more than your life,” Alfard said in a joking tone as he picked up a sandwich. In truth, the sandwiches were quite delicious, and they had the warmth that only food made with love had.

“So, how’s the analysis going?” Alfard asked, glancing over at the large, complex magic circle in the corner of the room. This was the Room of Succession, and Oscar had been trying to analyze the magic circle using the information processing abilities of his glasses.

“No problems so far. We’ll have to adjust the formula a little for

what we need in the labyrinths, so I'm going to need some more time with it, but...thanks for letting us do this, Al."

This magic circle was the vampire kingdom's greatest secret, as well as its greatest treasure. Normally, letting outsiders analyze it would be completely out of the question, but after hearing why the Liberators needed the magic circle, Alfard had agreed to let them examine it without hesitation. Had they been dealing with any king other than Alfard, Oscar and the others would have had a much harder time.

"Don't mention it. You're doing this for the future. I don't mind at all," Alfard said casually.

"Ha ha...I really like that straightforward side of you."

Alfard was known for being decisive and unwavering. Apparently, when his nobles and citizens had been affected by the church's brainwashing, he hadn't been shaken at all. In his eyes, those who had fallen for the brainwashing had only themselves to blame, so he mercilessly cut down anyone who opposed him. He'd even justified it afterward, saying that for a noble, dying to protect your homeland was the true nature of noblesse oblige and that he'd done them a favor by killing them.

It had probably helped that most of the zealots had been part of the faction that had resented having a human queen. Alfard had been more than happy to slay anyone who tried to lay a hand on his wife or son. If anything, it had saved him the trouble of rooting out all the seditious elements in the country, since they'd all come to him. His complete lack of mercy had actually instilled a fear greater than fanaticism in the hearts of those brainwashed by the church, and they'd surrendered so quickly that Alfard's methods had actually kept casualties to a minimum.

I wish I could be as straightforward and decisive as you... Oscar thought enviously, looking down. As he scarfed down his beloved wife's lunch, Alfard cast a sidelong glance at Oscar and asked, "Where do you think a person's soul resides?"

Oscar gave him a confused look, and Alfard continued the conversation on his own.

"Their head? Their heart? Their stomach? Some scholars claim people don't have souls at all. Others say our souls flow through our blood. Though really, it's mostly vampire scholars who think that. That's why they care so much about blood purity."

"Umm...Laus is a spirit magic user, so..."

"Yeah, the former theory's definitely dead in the water. Incidentally, I was curious, so I asked Laus-dono the same thing the other day."

"Oh? What did he say?"

Oscar had never really thought about where a person's soul resided, but now that the topic had been brought up, he was curious.

"Apparently, it's diffused throughout your body. If we think of the body as a vessel, our souls are the liquid energy that fill it up. Every person's soul is unique, and it's an integral part of what makes them them. You can think of a soul as a person's life force. Or so Laus-dono said, anyway."

Alfard went on to explain that when a person died, the body stopped being a suitable vessel, so the soul spilled out and dispersed.

"The question is, what happens to a soul after it disperses? And how exactly does the energy that makes up a soul come to reside in people in the first place? Where do souls come from, and where do they go?"

"This is starting to get rather philosophical."

"Not at all. This is about love...and romance."

"I don't see how that's connected."

Oscar gave Alfard a confused look, but Alfard simply continued as if it was obvious, "Oscar, have you heard about a concept called reincarnation?"

"I think we're getting off-topic."

"Not at all. This is still about love and romance."

Alfard explained that there was an old fairy tale in the vampire kingdom that still inspired stories to this day. It was about people being reborn. Upon hearing that, Oscar looked more than a little intrigued.

"Laus-dono has a theory that both mana and souls are simply different forms of the same energy."

"Wait, does that mean when we use mana, we're depleting our souls?"

"Not exactly. His idea is that when energy from the natural world enters people's bodies, it takes concrete form as either mana or a soul, so they come from the same source, but aren't one and the same."

"Hmm, I think I get it? Is it like how if you desynthesize different types of ores and minerals, you'll see they're all made from the same basic components?"

"You can look at it that way, yeah. Some scholars also claim that everything in existence is made up of a combination of extremely tiny particles banding together and forming more complex structures."

Alfard finished eating his last sandwich, which seemed to mark the end of this strange topic of discussion.

"Anyway, the point is that when people die, their souls dissipate, but they don't disappear. They simply become a part of the natural world again. They're still there."

"Still there..."

“Then after eons and eons, when the right vessel is born, they once again coalesce and enter that vessel.”

“So what you’re trying to say is that when a person dies, their soul turns into primal energy, and eventually, that primal energy enters another person and becomes their soul?”

“Exactly. And since they return to nature first, it’s not like the person who inherits that soul remembers what it was like before.”

“So reincarnation is when, for some reason or the other, that soul doesn’t completely get wiped clean and retains its original form when it enters another person?”

“Something like that. Based on what Laus-dono said, it seems possible, wouldn’t you say? In truth, there are some nobles and members of the royal family that think the Font of Knowledge is actually the memories of all past kings.”

“You’re making a lot of leaps in logic and there isn’t enough evidence to back up those claims. I’m not sure it’s a very sound theory.”

“That’s why I said this was about love and romance.”

If two people loved each other enough, then no matter how many times they were parted by death, they’d be reborn and reunite. When Alfard put it like that, it certainly did seem romantic. Smiling, Alfard rose to his feet.

“Reincarnation exists,” he said in a voice full of conviction, and Oscar adjusted his glasses to hide his expression. He could tell that Alfard had told him this story as a roundabout way of cheering him up. Alfard could tell Oscar still had reservations about the labyrinth project, and he’d wanted to give Oscar at least some peace of mind. If reality was unforgiving, at least now Oscar had a fairy tale to believe in. It wasn’t scientific, but Oscar did feel as though his heart was a lot lighter.

Love and romance are a lot more wonderful than I thought.

“Al, thanks for cheering me—”

“Think about it. If reincarnation doesn’t exist, then how do you explain the shock I felt upon seeing Selene for the very first time?! That had to have been fate! Our love from ages past must have reunited us here in different bodies! Our love for each other is simply too strong to die out after just one lifetime!”

“Wait, you just wanted to brag about how much you love your wife?!”

Oscar chucked the water bottle at Alfard, who easily caught it, then let out a hearty laugh and strode out of the room.

Oscar glared at his retreating back, but then after a second, he asked in a slightly embarrassed voice, “Al, do you have any books on reincarnation you’d recommend?”

“Here.”

Al took a tome out of his pocket and handed it over to Oscar. He'd clearly come prepared. Oscar took it with a surprised look, and Alfard grinned at him.

“You probably felt like it was fate too, didn't you?”

Oscar thought back to his first meeting with Miledi.

“I've finally found you!”

He still remembered the smile she'd given him and the words she'd said. Oscar once again adjusted his glasses to hide the blush spreading across his face. He could hear Alfard's laughter echoing through the room as he left.

Liv Gruen Is Eternal

“Hmmmhmmhmmhmm!”

A pleasant singing voice rang out across a high-class restaurant sitting in a corner of one of the desert cities. The performance was so stellar it moved the hearts of all who heard it. The guests all forgot their meals as they lost themselves in the song...and the beauty of the songstress. She had waist-length golden-blond hair, tanned skin, and glittering jade-green eyes. Her ivory-white dress showed off her ample cleavage as well as her slender legs.

“Thank you very much for listening to my song,” she said with a bow as she finished. Her every movement was elegant and refined, and the smile she gave the crowd was filled with innocent joy.

The diners showered her with thunderous applause.

“Yunfa-chan, that was amazing!”

Indeed, the singer was none other than Yunfa. She smiled politely at the applause, looking more like a grown-up version of Susha than the energetic tomboy she'd been as a young girl.

“Y-Yunfa-san! I fell in love with you at first sight! Please marry me!” one of the patrons shouted, getting down on one knee in front of Yunfa. The restaurant went silent. Everyone could tell this guy was a newcomer. After all, none of the regulars would dare make a move on her. They all stared at the poor man with looks of pity, recalling their own past attempts.

“Mmm, well...”

Yunfa folded her arms, the gesture emphasizing her formidable bust. She then put one finger on her lips and cocked her head as if considering it. Each and every one of her mannerisms was adorable, and a number of the patrons were *hnnnghing* in the background.

“I'm not sure what my husband will have to say about that...”

The young man's expression stiffened.

“Husband?” he asked, but Yunfa didn't respond.

Instead, she smiled charmingly at him and said, “But don’t worry, I won’t say anything to him. I’m sure none of the people here will either.”

The young man paled.

Don’t tell me she’s actually the wife of some powerful noble?!

Yunfa knelt down in front of the man.

“I’m afraid I can’t marry you, but I can at least sing for you.”

“U-Umm...” the youth mumbled as he struggled to meet Yunfa’s gaze.

“Will you come listen to me again?” Yunfa asked in a calculatingly innocent voice.

Naturally, the young man was smitten.

“Of course!” he said immediately. The patrons all cheered, celebrating the birth of a new regular, and Yunfa sang another song for them. She’d become a local idol, and almost all of the powerful and influential men in the area were her fans. No one knew how old she was, or where she’d come from, so speculation and rumors abounded. People claimed her mystery husband was someone so powerful none of the local elites were worth his time. They said he traveled only under heavy guard and was possibly even one of the lords of the federation. Either way, everyone knew that Yunfa wasn’t someone they were allowed to put their hands on.

Of course, Yunfa was the source of most of these rumors, and she was spreading them so that tales of her love for her husband would carry on for generations, as well as rumors about the Liberators and the truth they’d espoused. It was for that reason that she’d won over the young man, who was the successor to quite a large trading company.

“Naiz-sama, your beloved wife is hooome!” she said, completely discarding the persona of a mysterious, enchanting songstress as she stepped through the door.

“Oh, welcome back, Yunfa. How’d it go?” Naiz asked as he walked over to greet her, an apron tied around his waist.

“Perfectly. I turned that young merchant into one of my fans!”

“I-I see...” Naiz mumbled, offering a silent prayer for the poor merchant. Honestly, he wasn’t too fond of Yunfa’s methods, but he couldn’t really bring himself to stop her, since he knew why she was doing it. It didn’t help that he felt guilty about continually refusing Yunfa’s requests to have children. She’d been coming on to him ever since she’d officially become an adult and they’d gotten married, but he hadn’t been able to work up the courage to respond to her feelings.

Just as he was thinking that, Yunfa pushed him down and said, “Naiz-samaaa!” in a seductive voice.

“W-Wait, Yunfa! Miledi and the others are coming soon!”

“Don’t worry, we’ve got plenty of time until they get here. Take off your clothes, dear husband.”

Yunfa straddled Naiz, panting heavily. She’d already stripped off half of her clothes and Naiz realized that it was too late to stop her now.

“Nacchan! I bought you a bunch of— Oh.”

Miledi and the others—who’d returned a bit earlier than planned—all stiffened up as they opened the door.

“Th-This isn’t what it looks like! I just—”

“Sorry, but could you come back in, say, two hours?” Yunfa said in a sweet voice.

“My bad!” Miledi shouted as she dashed out the door. Oscar and the others gave Naiz a pitying look, but before they could turn to follow Miledi, Naiz stopped them. They then safely transitioned into the celebration party for completing Naiz’s volcano labyrinth without him having to get mounted. As everyone dug into the food, Miledi started teasing Naiz about how he’d probably have kids very soon. To her surprise, though, Naiz’s expression darkened as she mentioned that.

“What’s wrong, Naiz?” Oscar asked.

Naiz hesitated, not wanting to hurt Yunfa’s feelings.

Sensing his turmoil, Laus asked, “Hmm, do you not want to have children?”

He was right on the money. Trembling a little, Naiz replied, “Yes...because I won’t be able to look after them.”

Yunfa was the only one allowed to go into his labyrinth, so he would never see them.

“I’m sorry, Yunfa. I know you want kids, but...I just can’t bring myself to...”

“Naiz-sama...” Yunfa mumbled as she gently took Naiz’s hand. “Don’t worry...”

“Yunfa...”

“Because I’m already pregnant.”

“I see... I suppose in that case, I— You what?”

Naiz had not been expecting that curveball. He turned to Yunfa, his neck creaking like an old door, while Miledi and the others all gasped.

“I could tell you were trying your best not to get me pregnant, Naiz-sama, so...” Yunfa paused there, grinned, and gave him a thumbs-up. “...I secretly swapped out all your contraceptives!”

“Nice going, Yunfa-chan!” Meiru shouted, whistling in appreciation. Lyutillis looked quite happy as well, but all of the men were pale-faced. They stared at Yunfa like she was some kind of monster.

“Why?! Whyyyyyyyyyy?!” Naiz shouted, cradling his head.

Vandre gave him a wake-up slap and said, “You should know by now that you can’t go against Yunfa.”

“I already knew you were a coward, Naiz-sama, so as your wife, I had to take charge.”

“Ngh...but...”

“Listen here, Naiz-sama. Even if you won’t be able to meet your children, you’ll be able to convey your feelings for them through me. Besides, I know I’ll be able to raise them well. That’s why I’ve built up such a huge circle of allies.”

Yunfa took Naiz’s hand in her own, her eyes glimmering with the determination only a mother possessed. It was clear her resolve was far greater than Naiz’s.

“Thank you, Yunfa,” Naiz said, smiling at her. Yunfa smiled back, tears welling up in her eyes.

After that, the celebration continued, but now everyone was celebrating Naiz’s new kid instead of the completion of the labyrinth.

“I was hoping we could all come up with a new family name together, by the way,” Yunfa said halfway through the festivities. Her family would pass down the truth of the Liberators, so she wanted them to have some input on the family name.

After thinking about it for a while, Miledi timidly suggested, “Umm, we can’t use the exact same last name as the founder of the Liberators, but what if we modified it a little bit? They’re going to be the ones telling the Liberators’ story to the world, so I’m sure Belle would be happy if they inherited her name.”

Everyone seemed satisfied with that, and Yunfa and Naiz also decided to add their own initials to the family name as well as a small reminder of where they’d come from. But while they’d settled on a family name, they still needed a first name as well.

“Hmm...judging by the shape of the soul, it’s a girl,” Laus said, examining Yunfa’s belly.

Yunfa had already had a name in mind if it was going to be a girl, and everyone else approved of it as well, so Yunfa and Naiz’s first daughter came to be named Susha L. G. Levellair. She would be the first of many storytellers to pass down the legend of the Liberators.

Diene’s Worries

“Get to work, you lazy pigs!”

A young woman’s pretty voice echoed through one of the ships that made up the ship island of the western seas, followed by the sounds of a whip cracking. The men getting their asses whipped didn’t seem to be hating it in the slightest, however.

“Thank you very muuuuuuch!” they said in unison, trembling with ecstasy. The onlookers didn’t seem worried for these men either. If anything, they were excited.

“Get serious already!”

“Goddammit, I was too late!”

“Man, I’m jealous!”

They all shouted in unison.

“You guys are doing this on purpose, aren’t you?” the young woman asked, looking at the men below her as if they were trash. While her gaze excited them, the men could feel her genuine anger and they hurriedly prostrated themselves in front of her.

“W-We’re terribly sorry! But we couldn’t help it!”

The girl stepped on the head of one of the men.

“Who am I?!” she shouted.

“Don Diene, our beautiful boss and queen!”

“If you know who I am, then stop looking to get punished, you filthy perverts!”

There was another crack of the whip, and the men moaned in ecstasy. Baharl let out a long sigh as he watched Diene discipline the men from the deck of the island’s largest ship.

“She really did grow up to be just like her sister, huh?”

He couldn’t help but worry that before long, Andika would be a city of perverts instead of a city of outlaws. Two years had passed since Meiru had gone into her labyrinth, and now Diene was as old as Meiru had been on the day of the decisive battle. She now wore the same kinds of revealing clothing that Meiru had preferred, and just like Meiru, she looked like a doting older sister while actually being a greedy, hardcore sadist. There was only one thing about Diene that was different from Meiru now.

“Dad, did you just sigh after looking at my chest?!” Diene shouted.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Diene leaped up onto the deck Baharl was on and glared at him, covering her extremely modest bust with one arm.

“Miledi-san said it best. Boobs are just useless blobs of fat. Not that a man like you would understand.”

Baharl patted Diene’s head to calm her down, and while she still pouted at him, her anger started to dissipate. In some ways, she was still a child, which Baharl found both endearing and worrying.

For a while, the two of them just basked in the sea breeze and looked out over the waves.

“It’s almost time, dad.”

“Yep. I know you’ll be able to take care of things here. Don’t worry, your dad’s gonna find us a new continent in no time!”

Today was the day that half of Andika's citizens would set off in search of a new continent. There was an entire fleet of ships ready to go, led by the new and improved Melusine. Baharl was the captain of the Melusine, and while he made it sound like it'd be a short jaunt, Diene knew she probably wouldn't ever see him again.

Diene lovingly stroked the railing she was leaning against and said, "Take care of dad and everyone else for me, Melusine."

The memories she'd made with everyone on this ship were the greatest treasure she'd ever found.

"Oh yeah, I have a message from Nee-sama."

"Hm, what's she want?" Baharl asked, narrowing his eyes.

In a mischievous voice, Diene said, "Good luck on your journey. You better not kick the bucket too quickly, you shitty dad."

"She needs to learn to respect her elders," Baharl said in a gruff voice, though Diene could tell his ears were red. Even if it had been paired with an insult, Baharl was glad that Meiru had at least called him dad.

"Sheesh, the two of you need to learn to be more honest with yourselves," Diene said with a small smile.

Baharl scratched his head awkwardly, then started making preparations to weigh anchor. He and the others were ready to depart by midafternoon.

"You take care, Diene."

"You too, dad. May the seas smile upon you always."

Once they'd said their final goodbyes, Baharl turned to his crew and said, "All right lads, it's time to set sail! Follow me, Baharl Devault!"

Diene continued to watch the fleet of ships until they'd vanished beyond the horizon. Once they were gone, she finished up her work for the day, then opened up the portal in her room. This was a special Dark Gate that only Diene could use. It led straight to Meiru's room in her labyrinth. As she stepped through it, she wrinkled her nose.

"Ugh, what's this smell?! Nee-sama, you did it again, didn't you?!"

"D-Diene?! I-It's not what you think!"

Meiru's room was filled with acrid smoke. She was wearing an apron and had a plate in her hands. The plate was loaded with what appeared to be some kind of ooze.

"I thought I'd make some snacks for my cute little sister, but I think the ingredients were spoiled."

"Don't blame the ingredients. No matter how spoiled they were, they wouldn't end up looking like a slime from hell."

Would she just starve to death without me? Diene wondered with a sigh.

Noticing her sister's disappointment, Meiru tearfully looked away.

These past two years had proven that Meiru had absolutely no ability to take care of herself. As a result, Diene—who actually knew how to do housework—now wore the pants in their relationship. However, it didn't actually bother Diene too much that Meiru was completely hopeless at household chores.

Heh heh, Nee-sama's so cute when she's crying. She really can't do anything without me. But it's okay, since I'm here to take care of her. He he he...

"H-Huh? Why do I suddenly feel so cold?"

Meiru had yet to realize that Diene was a bigger siscon than even her. At any rate, Diene baked the snacks that Meiru had failed to make, and she told Meiru all about what was happening on the surface as they ate the snacks with some tea.

"By the way, how are things going with Dylan-kun?" Meiru asked with a grin. Dylan had been stopping by Andika every now and then to see how well Diene was faring, and she'd started to develop a crush on him. Unfortunately—

"Your boobs are big, mom's boobs were big, so why are mine so tiny?!" Diene shouted.

"D-Diene? What's wrong? I've never seen you look so..."

"That stupid pervert! Every time he shows up, he just stares at the boobs of my crew members!" Diene roared as she smacked the table in frustration. "Can you believe it, Nee-sama?! I finally worked up the courage to ask him what type of girl he was into and he said, 'I like girls with boobs like Meiru-san's.' What kind of answer is that?!"

Meiru did her best to calm Diene down, but Diene simply glared at Meiru's voluptuous chest instead.

"For the first seven years, whenever Dylan-kun talked to me, he was always staring at your boobs!"

"O-Oh yeah, I guess he did do that."

"Last time we met, he even said, 'I still haven't found a pair of breasts that surpass Meiru-san's. Hers were truly legendary.'"

"Isn't he being a bit too brazen? I can't believe teasing him about how he always stared at my boobs when he was only half-healed ended up turning him into someone like this..."

Meiru cocked her head and gave Diene a puzzled look as she asked, "How did you even fall for a guy like that?"

"I mean...normally, he's very gentlemanly...and he's really strong, and he always pays attention to me, and his smile is cute, and..."

Diene started fidgeting in embarrassment, prompting a grin from Meiru.

I see my little sister is attracted to the wrong kinds of boys.

In truth, Diene had a penchant for attracting all sorts of unusual things, not just boys. For some reason, all of the Seamen had moved

from Ur Lake to Andika, and even the Hell Eater was quiet when around Diene. That was one of the reasons why everyone had unanimously decided to make Diene their boss.

Smiling, Meiru took Diene's hands into hers and said, "Well, just make sure you find your own happiness, okay? You don't have to come visit me every single day if it starts becoming too much of a hassle."

Meiru loved Diene, but she didn't want to tie her down. However, Diene simply replied, "I'm happiest when I get to spend time with you, Nee-sama. This is what I always wished for. Anyone who tells me to stop seeing you isn't someone worth loving."

Meiru was momentarily taken aback, but then she hugged Diene and said, "Dieeeeeene I love youuuuuu!"

"Heh heh heh, I know. I love you too, Nee-sama."

It had taken many years, but the two siblings were finally able to spend time together like they'd always wanted to.

The Labyrinth Project Committee Meeting

"All right, it's time to start thinking about what trials we're going to put in our labyrinths," Miledi said in a leisurely voice. Things had been a bit strained when Miledi had first told everyone about the deal she'd struck with Ehit, but now they were determined to make the most of the seven years they'd have together.

"We can base them on the proposals we gave you over the past half month, right?" Oscar asked.

"Sounds good to me. Umm, O-chan, you're putting yours in the Greenway and the concept you're going for is a battle gauntlet, correct? That sounds good to me."

"I found where you chunked the Divinity Stone with the compass. That seems like the perfect place to start the true labyrinth. I'll bury it right at the entrance. It can be the reward for whoever clears the top hundred floors first."

Meiru and the others stared at Miledi in shock.

You did WHAT with a Divinity Stone?!

Miledi made a don't worry about it gesture and moved on as if it wasn't a big deal.

"I see you're also planning to make a safe zone fifty floors in. That's smart, but you should booby trap it so only people who can disarm the traps can use it."

"I can't tell if you're trying to show challengers mercy or just make their life hell."

Indeed, many centuries in the future, a certain vampire princess's uncle would nearly find himself killed by that trap, and then later seal

his niece in that very same room.

"I also need to make sure the labyrinth is habitable for the people fighting their way through it."

"You want them to be able to use it as a place to train once they've beat it, right?" Laus asked, and Oscar nodded.

"Then we'll need beds and a bath! Oh, and make sure the bath is a big open one!" Lyutillis said excitedly.

Meiru gave her a sidelong glance and asked, "Why?"

"Anyone who manages to conquer the labyrinth will have made it all the way to the bottom of the abyss! If they came with comrades, they'll want to deepen their bonds with them, and there's no better place to do that than a passionate bath together followed by some quality time in bed!"

"What if they're both girls, or guys?" Naiz asked, looking at Lyutillis like she was an idiot.

"I don't see why that would be a problem," Lyutillis replied coolly, which shut everyone up. Meiru looked a little uncomfortable, though. At the time, no one expected that Lyutillis would actually get her way with the bath, or that it would be used exactly like she'd imagined it would. Nor did they expect that the seven of them would also test out the labyrinth's living environment...and that Oscar would end up accidentally running into Miledi while she was taking a bath. Suffice it to say, Lyutillis had come up with a very wonderful idea.

"Ahem! I'm next. I'll use the Reisen Gorge, and the concept of my labyrinth is going to be forcing people to overcome challenges without magic. Also, I'd like to have a way of forcibly ejecting people from the labyrinth once they've cleared."

"Why's that?" Meiru asked.

"Once I start talking to them, I'll end up craving more interaction. But if they stay for too long, it'll go against my promise of not having any contact with the outside world. It'd be a problem if a bunch of apostles came and made a mess of my labyrinth, so I need a way to get rid of people even if they want to stay after beating my labyrinth," Miledi said with a smile.

Oscar and the others fell silent, but Lyutillis said, "If you're going to be using mostly physical traps, you should include something that sprays white liquid over everyone! Oh, and that liquid should work as an aphrodisiac!"

Meiru slapped Lyutillis across the face, and she moaned in ecstasy.

"Miledi..." Oscar muttered worriedly.

"I-I won't add anything like that! Why are you giving me that suspicious look, O-chan?!"

"I mean, you are a bit of a closet pervert..."

"Excuse me, Mr. Maid Fetish? You wanna go?"

Little did they know a certain worthless rabbit would eventually get a face full of that white liquid many years in the future. Thankfully, Miledi didn't include the aphrodisiac effect or that episode could have ended up much worse.

"Umm, let's just move to the next one. I'll be putting my labyrinth in the volcano. I want to see how well challengers can solve complex puzzles with the extreme heat sapping their concentration. I also want to make the enemies in the labyrinth out of lava."

"What kind of puzzles?" Laus asked, and Naiz explained that he wanted to make mazes made of invisible spatial magic walls and a teleportation puzzle with hundreds of options, but only one correct solution.

"It'll be pretty tough to get through that while dealing with the heat."

Had a certain monster of the abyss not noticed the intentional shortcut Naiz had created, he and his party would have had to go through that tedious maze and fight a heavily armed lava minotaur at the end of it. However, beating that minotaur would have halved the number of lava snakes they would need to fight in the final trial room.

Unsurprisingly, Lyutillis, the natural pervert, found a way to put a lewd spin on Naiz's idea.

"Heat...which means they'll be sweating all the time. In order to cool off, they'll strip off their layers and what little clothes they have left will be see-through because of the sweat. That's such an indecent concept! You're a genius, Nacchan-san!"

Of course, that wasn't Naiz's intention at all, so he teleported Lyutillis high into the air and made her fall head-first onto the ground to knock some sense into her. Sadly, that just made Lyutillis happier.

Ignoring her completely, Meiru went on to talk about her labyrinth.

"I'll be making use of Andika. My trials will mostly be mental. I want to see if the challengers can withstand the insane fanaticism of church zealots."

"If you want to test people mentally, Onee-sama, you should at least reverse their emotions and see if they can still work together with their comrades while insulting each other."

"The things you come up with are seriously fucked up."

Putting that thought out of her mind, Meiru went back to describing her labyrinth, saying, "Everyone else is making their final trial monsters, right? In that case, I want to make mine a giant armored submarine."

"You want challengers to fight a whole submarine with their bare hands? Or well, whatever weapons they have."

"An apostle could do it, so if they can't, then they wouldn't get

very far. Oh, and as a reward for clearing it, we could give them a mini-submarine of their own. They'll be in the middle of the ocean, so it would help them get back to shore easier."

"The terms of the contract say I can't send any of my artifacts to the surface, but I guess it should be fine as a reward for clearing the labyrinth."

Of course, Hajime had used his pile bunker to break open a shortcut through the labyrinth after being attacked by the Hell Eater, so he'd never seen this submarine fight.

"I suppose I'm up next," Laus said. "Ehit said at least one of the labyrinths needs to be in the Divine Mountain, right?"

"Yep. I guess you're gonna take that one, Lau-chan?"

"I'm the most familiar with the area, after all. The concept of mine is going to be how well challengers can resist brainwashing, and whether or not they can completely abandon any and all faith in Ehit. It'll be a relatively short one that won't take much time. I'll have most of it happen in their own minds, with trials that test their souls. Oh, and if possible, I'd like to bring back copies of Darrion and the other commander-class knights for the challengers to fight."

"In that case, you should—"

"Lyu-chan, please just shut up."

"You're so cruel, Miledi-tan! I was just going to suggest that if you're going to make part of it happen in their minds, you should show them an ideal world and see if they have the resolve to break out of the illusion!"

"O-Oh, that's an actually reasonable suggestion. Sorry."

No one had expected Lyutillis to recommend something sane.

"It's fine. I understand that no one would expect me to come up with such a splendid idea. But think about how wonderful it would be to bask in an illusory paradise where everyone insulted me all the—"

"Okay, next!"

Once a pervert, always a pervert. Everyone nodded in agreement, and Vandre stepped forward.

"I'm planning on using the Schnee village, of course. The concept of my labyrinth will be whether or not you can face off against the darkness in your own heart."

"So, like, coming to terms with fetishes you didn't even know you had?"

"Everyone, I have a suggestion. How about we continue this meeting without the resident pervert?"

"Agreed!" everyone said in unison. Meiru then tied Lyutillis up and started dragging her outside.

"Wait, stop! I just wanted to lighten the mood because everyone's been so tense recently!"

The forest queen's wails slowly faded away, and finally, the meeting was able to proceed smoothly.

Sadly, almost all of Lyutillis's suggestions did end up getting used in her own labyrinth. As a result, Miledi and the others decided to make the condition for entering hers clearing a few others in hopes of sparing future challengers the pain and suffering that would be inflicted on them.

How Status Plates Were Made

A few years had passed since the Liberators began making their labyrinths. About half of them were already complete, and Miledi and the others had gathered in the forest to take a short break and celebrate this milestone. All of the children were there to celebrate as well, and while everyone was eating, Oscar took something out of his Treasure Trove to show everyone.

"I'm thinking of making a tool that gives everyone an objective evaluation of their abilities so people can more easily see how strong they are. What do you guys think?"

Miledi and the others exchanged glances, while Laus asked, "Is this why you had me help you make that artifact that can read information from a person's soul?"

"Yep. We don't want people who are unprepared recklessly challenging our labyrinths, since they'll just die. But if everyone can gauge their own power level, they'll be able to determine whether or not they stand a chance."

"I see... Yeah, that's a good idea, O-chan!"

Miledi and the others nodded in agreement, but Diene cocked her head and asked, "Oscar-san. I'm from Andika, so I'm not a hundred percent sure about this, but isn't the church already doing something similar?"

"Yeah, people living on this side of the continent have to get examined by the church once they reach a certain age to assess their powers."

That was how the church checked to see if anyone possessed special magic. There was a magical tool in every church that could confirm that. That tool could only be created by a special forge in the Divine Mountain. Incidentally, the tool took the form of a portrait of Ehit. When someone touched it, their mana went into the portrait and it determined how much total mana they had, what their aptitudes for the various fields of magic were, and what their job was. There were mana inhibitors spread out in a line across the edges of the portraits that were used to make these estimations. Because each person had a unique mana signature they went through the inhibitors at different

rates and in different ways. If you didn't have an aptitude for a certain kind of magic, your mana wouldn't be able to make it through that inhibitor at all and stop there. The jobs were all classifications made by the church, so it wasn't as though people could be assigned an unidentified job. The only time new jobs were added to the list was when someone accomplished great deeds in a new field that didn't already have a job assigned to it.

"By the way, I've hated the church since I was a kid, so I never went to one of those examinations. I used my orphan status as an excuse to not go, but if they'd tried to force me, I'd have come up with ways to deceive that artifact."

"How old were you when you did that?" Sharm asked.

Oscar sifted through his memories for a bit, then replied, "Six, I think."

You must have been one hell of a six-year-old...

Corrin looked up reverently at Oscar, and Sharm was once again reminded of how hard a hurdle it would be to win her affections when constantly being compared to the giant that was Oscar. Sensing his inner turmoil, Laus gently patted his son's shoulder.

"You were able to trick the church too, right, Naiz-sama?" Yunfa asked.

"Yeah. I couldn't hide how much mana I had, so they still suspected I possessed some form of special magic, but since they had no proof, there wasn't anything they could do. I actually didn't even know I could use spatial magic until much later, anyway."

"I see."

Bringing the conversation back on topic, Vandre said, "So basically, you want to make a more accurate version of that artifact that can update in real time, right?"

"Exactly. I want it to list all of a person's parameters, as well as any latent abilities they may have and how much of their potential they've realized. It'd be nice if it could also display any special magic they possess."

"I assume what you have now is just a prototype?"

"Put simply, you want us to test it, don't you?" Lyutillis asked.

"Yeah, I want to see what parts of it work and what don't."

Oscar didn't seem too confident in his creation, which was a rarity for him. He put a silver box onto the table and explained, "Put your hand on the magic circle at the top of the box. It'll read your information, then print out a card with it."

"Oh, that sounds fun. I'm first!" Meiru said, her eyes sparkling with curiosity. She placed her hand over the magic circle, and with a small ding, a rectangular plate came out of the opening on the side.

"Let's see what my stats are..."

Everyone else also leaned in, eager to see.

[Meiru Melusine. Age 25. Female. B98 W61 H89]

“Ninety...eight?! No wonder they’re so powerful! These boobs truly are a miracle!” Dylan exclaimed, clapping. The women all glared at him, while Ruth looked up at the ceiling in exasperation.

“Oscar-kun?”

“O-chan?”

Meiru and Miledi said in unison. Miledi, in particular, couldn’t believe that Oscar had done this, and there was a murderous glint in her eyes.

“D-Don’t misunderstand! I didn’t set it up to do this!”

Oscar hurriedly took the box back and started adjusting it.

“Okay, I strengthened its ability to read people’s inner selves over their physical traits. Give it a shot, Miledi!”

“Wait, I’m next?!”

Miledi had grown quite a bit taller over the past few years, but her boobs had remained pitifully small.

If it still ends up showing my three sizes, I’m going to kill you, four-eyes.

Glaring at Oscar, she put her hand over the box...and a card came out.

[I wish I’d been able to kiss O-kun at least once before—]

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Ahhh, Miledi! What are you doing?!”

Miledi crushed her card with gravity magic, blushing furiously. Thankfully, Miledi had read hers before anyone else could, so no one knew what it had said, but the other women could easily guess, and they were all grinning at her.

“Wow, this thing is complete garbage,” Vandre said coldly.

“Shut up! Do you know how hard it is to read a person’s information from their soul?! If you think you can do a better job, then be my guest!” Oscar shouted as he once again tinkered with the settings on the box.

“All right, now it should give the right numbers!”

Oscar glanced over at Vandre, and with a sigh, Vandre stuck his hand over the box.

[Vandre Schnee. Metamorphosis magic. Master of all martial arts. Mana: 6,000]

“Oh? It’s not very well organized, but it’s at least giving some useful—”

[Artistic ability: 5. Pathetic.]

“Die, four-eyes!”

“W-Wait, I didn’t mean to—stop! Don’t break my glasses!”

Vandre jumped on top of Oscar and started trying to snap his

glasses in half. Meanwhile, the rest of the Liberators decided to try the box out too, just out of curiosity.

[Laus Barn. You...will never get your hair back.]

"Heeeeeeeeeeeey!" Laus shouted, and Sharm had to jump in and calm him down.

[Lyutillis. Pervert Power: 9,999]

"Well, it's working properly for her," Meiru said, and everyone nodded.

[Naiz Gruen. Male. Level 89. Strength: 450—]

"Hmm, it seems to be working properly for—"

[Skills: Spatial magic. Seducing little girls]

"Yeah, no, it's not working right at all! Your artifact's defective, Oscar!"

"Naiz-sama, I think we need to talk," Yunfa said with a terrifying smile. Under her breath, she muttered, "I need to hurry up and stick him in the labyrinth so he doesn't get stolen by anyone else."

Ruth and Katy both had [severe brocon] on their cards, which made them blush furiously, while Sharm's said [Popularity Potential: 9,999], which made Corrin give him a cold look while he desperately tried to defend himself. Diene's said [Job: Don], which made everyone happy, and finally, it was Corrin's turn to try the box.

"But I don't have any special skills like everyone else..." she muttered.

"It'll be fine, Corrin-chan. It's not like this thing is working right anyway, so we're all just doing it for fun!" Miledi said.

"Well...all right, then. But don't laugh at me, okay, guys?" Corrin said as she placed her hand over the magic circle.

[Corrin. Level: 11. Job: Saint Kindness: 9,999 Consideration: 9,999 Motherly Love: 9,999 Patience: 9,999 Other Stats: 9,999 Total Power: Uncountable. Skills: Cooking VI, Intimidating Smile VII, Charm IX, Doting X, Spoiling X, Mental Fortitude X, Kindness Limit Break + Overdrive + special derivative skill: Saint's Love]

To everyone's surprise, it had actually accurately assessed Corrin...and the results were staggering.

After a moment of shocked surprise, everyone turned to Corrin and said, "Mommy..."

"Stop thaaaaaat!" Corrin wailed, her voice echoing through the forest.

In Search of My Beloved Synergist 5 (Finale)

"Haaah..."

Aisha, the poster girl for one of Velnika's restaurants, let out a long sigh at the edge of the forest next to Ur Lake. Her purple hair was

done up in a ponytail today.

"It's been two years since then..." she mumbled as she thought back to the time when her head had been filled with thoughts of how wonderful god was and how much she wanted to slaughter the rebels. Her memory of those days was a bit fuzzy, and the only explanation she could think of for her actions was that she must have been extremely drunk. As she walked through the trees, she let out another sigh.

Aisha had been working at a restaurant-inn here in Uldea's capital for the past two years to earn enough money to set off on her travels again, but the old owner of the place was so taken with her that he wanted her to inherit the business.

"Should I take over, or should I quit...?"

She'd never get an opportunity this good again. The restaurant was well-liked by the locals, and she doubted any other owner would be generous enough to hand their establishment off to someone they had no relation to. Furthermore, the man she'd been chasing after had been branded a criminal and a heretic. Honestly, it shouldn't even have been a question. The two adventurers who'd continued traveling with her despite her having long since run out of money to pay them seemed to think so as well.

"Gaaah, it's all Oscar-san's fault for being exactly my type!" Aisha shouted. She just couldn't seem to let go of her love for him. She slowly made her way over to her secret relaxation spot, but as she arrived, she found there were already people there.

"Oh? Good afternoon, miss."

"Hm? I didn't expect to see anyone else at this place. Hi there!"

Two people wearing bulky robes were standing in the clearing. They looked rather suspicious, especially considering the troubled expressions they made upon seeing Aisha. Judging by their voices, they were both women though, which reassured Aisha a little.

"Hello. Are you two tourists?"

"No...we're just here to honor a dead comrade."

"And to return his prized possession to its proper home."

Aisha nodded in understanding and looked down at the two women's feet. There was a big metal box there, and sitting inside it was a scythe. Aisha decided not to comment on that.

"What brings you here?" one of the women asked.

"Umm...I just come here when I need a place to think."

"Oh, sorry for stealing your spot. This might not make up for it, but we'd be willing to hear you out if there's something on your mind. We've got quite a bit of life experience, so perhaps our advice will help."

"It's not really the kind of thing I should dump on strangers."

“Well, we’re going to be here for a while, so we might as well listen.”

“R-Really? Well, if you insist...”

For some reason, Aisha felt as though she’d met one of these women before, and that they could be trusted. And so, she told them the whole story. By the time she was done, the two women were highly impressed by her grit and unending determination.

“What does the man you fell in love with look like? We’ve traveled all over the world, so we might even know him.”

Though Aisha appreciated the kindness, she was at a loss for how to respond. After all, Oscar was now a wanted criminal.

“I appreciate the thought, but I can’t tell you. Society doesn’t think too highly of him, so...”

“But at this rate, you’ll never find the man you’re looking for.”

Aisha knew that even if she chose to take over the restaurant, she’d have this lingering regret for the rest of her life. Of course, everyone had one or two big regrets in their life, but she didn’t want to end her search like this.

“He may not even be alive anymore, you know?” one of the women said gently.

Indeed, it was even possible that the man these two had come to mourn was the one Aisha was looking for. Moved by their kindness, and still feeling as though one of these women, in particular, could be trusted with anything, Aisha steeled her resolve and decided to tell them.

“Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Aisha Orcus. I’m Oscar Orcus’s wife.”

“What?!” the two women shouted in unison. But now that Aisha had made up her mind, she wasn’t going to stop.

“I understand your surprise! After all, he’s a traitor and a heretic! But he was born in the same city as me, and I simply cannot forget about the time we spent together!”

“Yeah, but isn’t it weird to call yourself his wife?!”

“Not at all, because I’m definitely going to marry him someday!”

“If you’re not married yet, it’s definitely weird to say that! Wait, I remember you know! You’re that girl from—” As she spoke, one of the women pushed back the hood of her robe. Upon seeing her face, Aisha finally realized why that woman had felt so familiar.

She pointed at the woman’s face and said, “Aaaaaah, it’s you, Miledi the Thief!”

“Wh-Who are you calling a thief?!”

As the two of them pointed at each other, the second robed woman—Lyutillis—pushed back her hood, her eyes sparkling. “Oooh, it’s a domestic dispute!”

Suddenly, the surface of the lake began to churn and a whirlpool formed. Oscar and Meiru were down below, preparing the seal that would bind Egness to the bottom of the lake. There was an old shrine to the lake spirits at the bottom, and at Lyutillis's suggestion, they'd made an epitaph carved with Badd's last words next to the shrine so that whoever next inherited the scythe would know about its previous owner. The whirlpool surged upward, and Oscar and Meiru hopped out of the torrent of water next to Miledi and Lyutillis.

"Lyu, it's ready. We can— Oh?" Oscar cut himself off when he saw who was with Miledi and Lyutillis.

"Oh my, what's going on here? Do we need to silence someone?" Meiru said with a deadly grin.

Aisha was completely stunned. She hadn't expected her reunion with Oscar would happen so suddenly.

"Umm...you're Aisha-san, aren't you?"

"Y-Y-Y-Y-You remember me?!"

"I-I mean, I did go to eat at your restaurant a lot," Oscar said with a smile, reminiscing about those days.

"Oh no, that smile's too precious," Aisha said, fainting on the spot.

Thirty minutes later, she finally woke up. By that time, Oscar and the others had enshrined Egness and Lyutillis had had plenty of time to mourn. At first, Meiru had suggested they leave immediately in case Aisha reported them, but after hearing about the situation, she started grinning and decided to see how things played out.

More than anything, though, it had been Miledi who had advocated they stay, saying, "You have a duty to hear Aisha-chan's feelings, O-chan."

Blushing, Aisha hiked up her skirt and walked over to Oscar, who was waiting by the lakeside. Miledi and the others watched from a short distance away. Their expressions were varied, and Miledi looked like she was mentally preparing herself for the possibility that Oscar would accept Aisha's feelings.

I knew she liked me, but I never thought she'd chase me this far...

Oscar thought, impressed, but also a little scared. The fact that she'd gone around calling herself his wife was more than a little concerning, after all.

"I-I've always loved you! I still do!"

"I'm a heretic, you know?"

"I know! B-But so long I can be with you, I don't care if the church denounces me!"

Oscar was happy that she felt so strongly for him that she'd continued to love him even after he'd become a wanted man, which was why he decided to be honest with her.

"Honestly, it makes me really happy to hear you say that, but I

can't give you the answer you want."

Aisha gulped and asked, "Why?"

"Because I've already decided how I'm going to spend the rest of my life."

The two of them stared at each other for a few minutes, then Aisha said in a small voice, "You're dedicating it to Miledi-san...no, not just to her, aren't you? You're trying to do something much bigger, I can tell."

She matched Oscar's forthright gaze and gave him a sad smile. Tears started to spill from her eyes as she asked, "I guess I can't be a part of that life, can I?"

Oscar nodded quietly, and Aisha looked up at the sky.

"All right, I'm glad I got that out of the way! Thanks for hearing me out, Oscar-san!"

Tears were still spilling down her cheeks, but her smile really did look refreshed.

"That means my journey ends here. I'll take over the owner's place after all, I guess!"

"I see...I'm sure you'll make it into a splendid establishment."

Aisha turned on her heel, bowed to Miledi, and started walking off. But just before she left the clearing, she looked over her shoulder and said, "Oh yeah, Miledi-san! There's something I always wanted to tell you!"

"W-Wait, me?!"

"During my journey, I met Kyaty and Kiara...and I heard this from them!"

Meiru and Lyutillis jumped in surprise. They hadn't expected Aisha to have a connection to them. Kiara was the only person she'd ever get to talk to once they headed into their labyrinths, and Kyaty had been one of Meiru's best friends. Lyutillis and Meiru were both very curious about what Aisha had been told, so they leaned forward eagerly.

"Apparently, you have orgies with Oscar-san, Naiz-san, and that big-boobed lady over there every single night?! I don't think that's very proper!" Aisha shouted, then dashed away before anyone could respond.

"Th-That's all a misunderstandiiiiiiiiiiiiing!" Miledi shouted far too late.

Needless to say, Aisha's inn grew into a huge hit. It came to be called the Water Sprite Inn...and even though it went bankrupt multiple times over the centuries, it always seemed to bounce back. And no matter the generation, it was always run by someone who was firm in their beliefs. Through it, the legends of the spirits of Ur Lake lived on.

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Arifureta Zero: Volume 6

by Ryo Shirakome

Translated by Ningen

Edited by DxS

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Original Japanese edition published in 2021 by OVERLAP, Inc.

This English edition is published by arrangement with OVERLAP, Inc., Tokyo

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Ebook edition 1.0: August 2022